When the Bluff Erodes

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When the Bluff Erodes

by atallrose32

Summary

Jack Crawford enlists the unstable but brilliant forensic profiler and professor Will Graham as a field investigator to assist in a serial abduction case after a third co-ed goes missing due to mounting pressure from the mayor of Minnesota as well as his boss Kade Prurnell to solve the case. As a safety precaution, Jack retains the psychiatric services of Dr. Hannibal Lecter to keep Will operating within the bounds of sanity, unknowingly forcing Will to confront his greatest fear. When the bluff of societal exceptions and insecurity erodes, where will Will Graham find himself? Struggling to keep his head above the raging waters of his murderous impulses with a very persistent Hannibal at his side, or standing on firm ground with Jack pushing him to his limits until he succumbs to mental breakdown? And it doesn't bode well for Jack that Will thinks he may be falling for the charming Dr. Lecter, who seems to be hiding a few secrets of his own.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Fed up with being the worst dressed at the lab during consults, Will buys himself a new shirt. And no, it has nothing to do with impressing Hannibal Lecter, who always wears a three-piece suit no matter how grisly the bodies on the slab are.

When the Bluff Erodes

Chapter 1

Will finishes buttoning his new plaid shirt, running his hands down the soft fabric to adjust the fit of the sleeves. He takes a step back to look himself over in the streaky mirror. His hair is a bit more manageable today than usual which may be a good omen. And he can't smell the sparingly applied aftershave, the same one that Hannibal found to be so offensive. But when you grow up poor you don't just throw things away, especially when they're a gift, you use them up until nothing is left. So that's what Will does with the aftershave his father sends him each and every Christmas; probably thinking that the ship on the bottle elicits fond memories from his childhood. It doesn't. The only thing the aftershave elicits is a musky cedar whenever Will sweats, which depending on the day can be quite often.

He takes off his glasses to tuck them into the front pocket of his shirt, feeling comfortable with himself this morning. This tealish blue, Hannibal would probably know the exact color name, and grey color combination really does compliment his eyes. The woman at the register wasn't just being polite or trying to make conversation.

Will rolls his shoulders and adjusts his neck before turning away from the mirror. He needs to attend to the pack before he leaves for Quantico. They already had their long walk/play time and breakfast. Now he just needs to check the various water bowls for refilling, let them out for another bathroom break and then it's treats all around, which should hold them over for the few hours he'll be away. Even though it may piss Jack off if Will leaves in the middle of a consultant again for three hours or so. But this is the routine that his strays have gotten used to when he was teaching, Jack be damned.

Once Will settles in the car he's at a loss, never quite knowing what to do with himself on the longish drive to the lab. Music seems inappropriate but letting his thoughts wander into the dark forest of his imagination is best saved for when he's safely at home in bed alone. Instead, he maps out the various directions Hannibal will lead him during their therapy session tonight and how to artfully evade the more personal questions. He gets to scenario eight when he parks in a visitor's spot.

He checks in at the security desk and attaches the visitor's badge to his shirt, feeling the guard's eyes linger longer than usual over his chest. Will dismisses this attention and heads straight to the examination room for the prelim conference about a body that was found in a daisy meadow. He opens the door to see that Zeller is the only one waiting. Will feels the apprehension coil in his chest. He takes a long inhale to uncurl the tension. Zeller looks up from the case file with the briefest flash of disappointment and disdain in his eyes as he registers Will's arrival. To his credit, he recovers quickly with a bright smile. Fake. But big enough to fool anyone else besides Will.

"Hey man. Looks like you beat the crowd. Nice shirt." He moves closer to Will to inspect the flannel shirt.

Bev and Price are bickering about something as they enter the room, so Zeller gets louder.

"I had one exactly like it, but it had a little bleach stain right," Zeller points to Will's right side, near where his elbow is resting, "there." He finishes, locating a blot of white on Will's shirt.

"The body has a bleach stain?" Bev asks while walking over to Will, abandoning her conversation with Price, her eyes bright with interest.

Will glares at Zeller for a moment before looking past him to the exit where Hannibal is now standing. Will's nostrils flare in anger.

Price picks up a case file from the pile that was meant to be passed out once everyone arrived and pages through it. "I don't see anything about bleach. Just pollen." He looks to Zeller with his brow furrowed.

Zeller grins. “Not on that body. On Will’s shirt.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Brian recognizes Will's shirt and starts to torment him.

Chapter 2

"Mixed your colors with your whites?" Bev offers with a kind quirk of her mouth.

Will refocuses on Zeller and lets his gaze bore into him, wanting him to feel, just a little, his thoughts. Of what he would like to do to him. Zeller thinks he knows something about Will by defining him within the limited capacity of his contained imagination. What Will is, Zeller couldn't fathom. Unless Will shows him.

Price finally looks up from the file to acknowledge Will. "Didn't you have a shirt just like that?" He asks Zeller.

"It is my shirt." The smile directed at Will this time is genuine from the relish of tormenting him and finally being the center of attention. He turns his back to Will to better face his audience. "Yeah, I got this shirt a few months back and splashed some bleach on it. Since it was a little small, I didn't mind donating it for someone less fortunate to have."

Will envisions killing Zeller. Swiftly lunging forward to grab his throat, squeezing so that no more asinine words can escape and then using the scalpel that was carelessly left on the adjacent table to cut out his tongue, throwing it into the trash where it belongs. Will's body hums at these rather tasty thoughts. A wolfish smile creeps across his face. He moves toward Zeller and places a hand on his shoulder. He squeezes just enough to be firm bordering on hurt.

"It certainly takes a big person to be so generous. And I'm sure you've had plenty of practice from wearing the hand-me-downs from your sister. Now if you'll excuse me." Will walks past Bev, who scoffs and Price, who drops his head to avoid eye contact. Will stares straight ahead.

As Will continues to exit the room, hesitating a moment while passing Hannibal which Hannibal capitalizes on.

He dips his head to Will and quietly says, "He's certainly more than one serving."

Will pauses, unsure if he heard Hannibal correctly, ultimately deciding he can't care about that right now. He needs to get out of this room.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will makes it out of the lab to indulge in some imaginative therapy.

Chapter 3

Will makes it down the winding hallway to the service restroom, locking the door behind him. He tilts his head back against the door and closes his eyes. *Everyone has thought about killing someone*, echoes like a taunt. A shaky breath is pulled into his thrumming chest. And another. And another. He decides to rinse the sweat from his face at the sink. The water is bitingly cold, especially on the back of his heated neck. Will watches his eyes in the mirror. Pupils large and eager. Madness lives here. He grips the edge of the sink, knuckles turning white from the pressure.

I should stuff something in your mouth to keep you from speaking. Maybe soaked in bleach. Cleanse your ignorant palate.

His anticipation grows, nudging against the hard edge of the sink. He closes his eyes and experimentally rolls his hips forward. A sigh catches in his chest, finally calming his humming nerves. New sweat prickles his temples. His eyes flash open.

This is my design.

A knock sounds against the door.

“Will?” Bev calls out.

Will steps back from the mirror and clears his throat. He quickly adjusts himself before retrieving his glasses from his pocket. In a few brisk steps he's at the door opening it.

Bev half smiles. "Zeller is an asshole. Middle kid syndrome. "

Will mimics Bev's half smile as he leans against the door frame, keeping the door open with a cocked hip.

"My brother left a shirt at my place last week. You look about the same size. Wanna swap?"

Will bristles internally at the thought of being someone's charity case. Instead of snarking back he smoothly says, "No thanks Bev. I'll leave the outfit changes to Hannibal. I'm going to go home to my dogs. They don't care what my clothes are covered in."

Bev nods and moves from the doorway to allow Will to pass. Hannibal approaches from behind Bev.

"Everything alright?"

She turns to him, startled to see how close he got so quickly and quietly.

"Headache. No aspirin. No ball, no play." She shrugs her shoulders.

Hannibal tsks. "What will Jack say?"

"Jack's sidelined today, court appearance. But the rest of the players are on the field. If you're willing to pitch some ideas."

He hesitates, a deep ache in his chest like a muscle spasm growing with every step Will takes further from him.

“We would really appreciate your help, doctor.” She knows exactly how thick to lay it on when buttering up an ego.

Hannibal grins, unable to resist the flaky flattery. He’ll discuss things with Will later during their therapy session tonight. Maybe over a drink. He purchased a new whisky Will may like, it's smoky and earthy like sitting around a campfire sharing stories of the horrors in the world.

“Of course, lead the way, Ms. Katz.”

They continue in the opposite direction of Will, who's quick stride has already led him out of sight. The sharp ache in Hannibal's chest becoming more like a dull throb. Easy to ignore but if unexamined for too long will radiate to other parts of his body. Ultimately consuming him.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hannibal assists team sassy science with their latest case and gives Brian the briefest of glimpses behind his veil.

Chapter Notes

content warning for graphic description of a violent murder

*Locard's Exchange Principle is basically the idea that when there's contact between two items like fibers, hair, pollen, soil ect, there will be an exchange of microscopic material. So wearing proper attire is imperative for collection and analysis of a crime scene.

**The painting Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth has some controversy surrounding it due to the fact that the subject, Anna Christina Olson, either lived with polio or Charcot-Marie Tooth disease which affects the leg muscles and coordination. Her method of getting around was to drag herself across the farm. However, he used a younger woman's body as the model to make it more "attractive". But according to some reports Anna Christina loved the painting and had a close relationship with Andrew.

Chapter 4

“Oh, come on, no Graham?” Zeller jeers.

“Keep up observations like that and you’ll be lead detective in no time,” Bev snides.

Zeller’s grin falls into a frown.

“Might I make a recommendation?” Price perks up, raising a gloved finger, his bright eyes protected by goggles.

Bev steps further into the lab leaving Hannibal to hover in the doorway. She looks to Price and then to Zeller. One of which is dressed properly in ppe for working in the lab. The other is not.

“Let’s relocate to a conference room, I’m sweating in delicate places,” Price says.

“Might as well. Jack only wanted us in here so Graham could do, whatever it is he does with the body. He should’ve been at the crime scene this morning, but you didn’t clear him yet,” Zeller says, flicking his eyes to Hannibal.

Hannibal doesn’t shy away from Brian’s glare, instead he holds his gaze like a challenge.

Bev looks pointedly at Zeller. “You should really be wearing ppe. Don’t you remember Locard’s Exchange Principle?”

“I’ve got gloves on.” Zeller shrugs his shoulders.

Bev crosses her arms in front of her chest.

“What? The body’s already been processed for trace. You really think Graham was going to come up with something we forgot, making us pull more samples for evidence?” He waits for her reply.

When she doesn’t humor him with a response he continues. “Bev, he’s not some savant. He’s an arrogant, socially awkward man with an overactive imagination. I mean, if it were anyone else who kept making these leaps and assumptions, we would haul them into an interrogation room for as long as we were legally allowed to.”

They keep their eyes locked on one another for an uncomfortable amount of time. Breaking the tension, Jimmy ambles between them. His face is red and his goggles are steamed over. He pauses outside of the lab, muttering a quiet excuse me to Hannibal, to doff his ppe, putting shoe covers, gloves and the paper apron in the trash. The goggles and lab coat go into separated hanging bags to be sterilized. He heaves a sigh of relief and fans his face.

Jimmy turns to Hannibal and asks, “To the conference room?”

Hannibal nods curtly. Bev collects the case files from the table and leaves without waiting for Brian to catch up.

They settle around a round table in an unused conference room. Bev slaps the files on the table for everyone to take one for themselves after she takes a file for herself. Brian rolls his eyes as he reaches for one. Jimmy grabs the last two and hands one to Hannibal.

“Thank you,” Hannibal says as he opens the file.

Hannibal thumbs through the pictures taken at the scene. The lack of artistry in the photographer is both apparent and appalling. There isn’t a single picture that has Saturn and Jupiter in the frame, which is really a shame since they’ll continue to drift apart before they are reunited years from now.

But there are plenty of pictures of the woman. She is dressed in a pink peasant frock with bare legs and no shoes. A slim black belt is cinched around her waist. She props herself up in the middle of a field sprinkled with yellow daisies, resting on her palms. A slender metal rod spikes though each bent elbow connecting to splayed palms before finally embedding itself in the ground, keeping her partially upright. Another rod kickstands out from her hip. While two more slightly thicker rods, one for each shoulder, support the weight of her upper body. Her body is twisted, almost as if she is trying to drag herself to the barn with the single amber light glowing in the distance. Her hair is carefully pulled back into a loose chignon to show her face frozen in silent agony. There’s a slender tube visible in the slit opening her throat, acting as a vase for a small spray of pink daisies. Flowers sprout from her open mouth. The front of her dress is unbuttoned all the way down to her belt to reveal she has been cut from hyoid bone to just above her navel. Her skin is peeled back and pinned

upon itself to showcase her rib cage which is meticulously scraped to remove the tissue between each rib. Her heart and lungs are missing. Her liver, stomach and intestines stay precariously in place. A bundle of pink daisies in full bloom have replaced her heart, delicately threaded through her stark white bones as if she could no longer contain the flowers growing from within herself.

"Her prints are still being manually analyzed against the eighteen hits we got. Hopefully, dental records and those dna samples will ping something we can compare the prints to for a positive id. But it may take a couple of days," Zeller says.

Hannibal pages forward into the report. "Was there no one in the barn?"

"No one was there according to local pd who got a call about a light on in Sam Miller's barn. The neighbor was concerned about the light considering Sam Miller's been visiting his daughter for the last three months to help her out with her newborn. We'll conduct more door to door interviews for witnesses but I'm not gonna hold my breath," Bev says.

Hannibal raises a brow. "And why not?"

"It was dark last night what with the crescent moon. And this is a pretty secluded area, a no traffic light kind of town. He had plenty of privacy to stage the body," Bev says.

"Can I just say what we're all thinking?" Jimmy asks, pausing for dramatic effect. "That this case is such a breath of fresh air compared to the last one. I mean this reminds me of that painting by Wyeth while the guy from last week strangled women and ejaculated in their mouths before tossing them into the Potomac River."

"This guy definitely is organized and methodical. Those rods were inserted before rigor set in which helped the body keep its shape. If that neighbor didn't notice the light in the barn within an eight hour window, then the whole scene would've been lost," Bev says.

"Maybe he's like a serial killer Banksy?" Jimmy asks excitedly.

Bev ignores his comment. Brian finishes paging ahead in the report and focuses on Bev.

“You think he staged this? No way. He had to have killed her there. Look at this trail of bent grass behind her. He severed her spinal cord to watch her drag herself to the barn for help because the light was on. So that means she probably isn’t a local.” Zeller counters.

“Alright then where’s the blood? If he killed her there, then where are her heart and lungs? Why aren’t there tire tracks in the field? There’s no way he wrangled this woman and a duffel bag full of supplies, metal rods no less, into the middle of a field alone.” Bev argues.

“Probably popped them into a little cooler. What I want to know is where did he find pink daisies in full bloom this time of year, the lucky bastard,” Jimmy says.

“We’re looking into local flower shops since he wanted us to notice those daisies. It took a steady hand and a good chunk of time to expose the rib cage, there’s a lot of muscle between those bones to cut away. Which is another reason why it was staged,” she says.

“Her vocal cords were cut. Why do that? It wasn’t a slip of the wrist, not with how accurate the rest of the incisions are and the tube didn't damage them. They were purposefully cut in case she called out to whoever she thought was in the barn,” Brian says.

Hannibal watches their rapport, amused by the sibling-like bickering. The novelty wears off after an hour. And Hannibal nearly snaps his pencil with frustration when a second hour passes with mind numbing lists of leads to follow up on. If Will were here, this wouldn't be dragging on so tediously. Will would've eloquently interpreted every detail, right down to the significance of the pretty but cow manure scented pink daisies being used as opposed to heady roses.

Beverly closes her folder. “Alright guys, I think we've exhausted ourselves for now. Let's break for the day and regroup with some new ideas tomorrow.”

“I don't know about you guys, but this case really has me craving some mead,” Price says. He turns to Hannibal. “You ever had mead before?”

“The elixir of the gods, yes. I've brewed my own.”

“Of course.” Zeller quips.

Hannibal shifts his gaze to Zeller, wondering if he would feel so brave if it were just them and the lights were out. He smirks at the thought.

“No thanks.” Bev shakes her head. “I've had enough of you guys today. No offense Hannibal. But I could use some me time. A glass of wine, some shitty reality show. Maybe Thai takeaway,” Bev says.

“What about you Zeller? Are you in?”

“Me?” He mock frowns while pointing to himself. “Nahh, I can't man, not tonight. I've got a date.” He showcases a toothy grin.

“Sounds like a plan. We could meet you there,” Zeller tries to cut Price off, but he talks on, “sitting at a different table of course. Ya know, in case she carries a butcher's knife in her purse or something. That's what friends are for. Am I right?” Price locks eyes with Hannibal, there's a desperate sheen to his gaze.

“I'm afraid I too must decline. I still have work to do this evening. Another therapy session.”

Price deflates a little. Bev sighs.

“Come on Jimmy, let's get some Thai. You ever try the place on 9th Street?” She leads him out with her arm around his shoulder while Price starts to share random snippets about

Thai culture to Bev.

"Please tell me this place doesn't serve their food with chopsticks. That's a Chinese influence and probably a way to pick out the ugly American. You really shouldn't be eating Thai food alone anyway, it's a social experience meant to be shared with friends or family."

"Can't that be said about any culture with regards to food? What culture dictates that you eat alone?" Bev retorts.

"Touché," Jimmy says.

They walk down the hall together to their respective locker rooms to reclaim their items. The murmurs of their conversation growing less coherent.

"What a push over," Zeller says.

"I hope you aren't as bullish with your dates, that would be unspeakably rude." Hannibal lets his eyes rest upon Zeller, burrowing into his enlarged pores, the ingrown hairs of his facial stubble, every imperfection magnified, beaming like a beacon.

And Brian can feel it. His confidence gets smaller like a shadow shrinking under direct sunlight. He shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly, brushing past Hannibal to leave the conference room.

"Whatever man," he says as he passes. "Hey," he calls out from over his shoulder as he leaves, "have a nice night with Graham. Make sure you tuck him in real tight. That man's one bad dream away from being our next case."

Hannibal inhales deeply. Softly closing his eyes to focus on the humming located in the back of his skull. He exhales once Zeller has left his presence. Opening his eyes a moment later. He checks the time on his wristwatch to gauge how to fill the hours before he's due to meet with Will. But first things first, he needs to go back downstairs to the front desk to sign

out for the guard's log. No need for a stop to the locker room, Hannibal always keeps his belongings on his person unless he can control the space.

Now Hannibal sits in his car considering his options. Will's session isn't for a couple more hours. But Hannibal feels an urge to go to him. Maybe drive to his house. They're at that level of comfort in their friendship. Aren't they?

A car horn sounds behind Hannibal. The light has been green for a couple minutes now. He looks in the rear-view mirror at the angry scowl behind him, hands waving with purpose. Hannibal doesn't budge. The light changes to yellow. The horn wails again, unrelenting. Then the light changes to red, as does the man's face. A vein in his neck throbs when he yells something indiscernible. Several minutes pass. The light changes back to green. Hannibal puts his four ways on and coasts the window down to wave the car around him.

The man passes Hannibal's car while flipping him off. He tosses, "Fucking brain-dead asshole," out the window like litter.

Hannibal notes the make, color and license plate before following the car, glad for the wonderful distraction as well as another present for dear Will. The last gift was flowers, maybe this time something sweet is in order.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Hannibal returns a lost dog to it's rightful caretaker, Will Graham, after a rather stressful day at the lab with tormentor Brian Zeller.

Chapter Notes

This is a softer chapter, hope it isn't too boring....

Chapter 5

Hannibal puts the duffel down in the cargo hold of his car and goes to close the trunk lid when a faint jingling from behind distracts him. He stills and listens. A sharp tack-tack approaches. Hannibal would reach in for the tire iron that proved to be so useful earlier, however there is a distinct odor of dog. He turns to face the sound and narrows his eyes. Confirmed. A dog. It’s only a dog.

“Shoo.” Hannibal flicks his hand dismissively. “Go on.” He looks around for the person responsible for this dog. But no one seems to be coming to claim it.

The dog sits and lowers its head to spit something onto the pavement. The metal glints in a passing car’s headlights. Hannibal leaves the tire iron in the trunk before confronting the stray. He kneels, keeping his gaze level with the medium sized white beast.

It’s a cufflink with HL inscribed in it. Hannibal checks his sleeves. His right cufflink is missing. He remembers Bev saying something about the unknowing pieces we all leave behind. Hannibal certainly doesn’t need a trail leading from the tableau in the barn back to him. He picks it up and puts it in his pocket to be properly cleaned later.

“Thank you,” he says to the dog who tilts its head in response.

The dog stays sitting and thumps its tail while looking at Hannibal. He can’t help but smile, just a little, at this hound with the large brown speckled ears and pink nose. He quickly turns back to the still open trunk and unzips a side pocket on his duffel. He turns back to the dog and unwraps a wax pouch. He crouches down with a slab of jerky in his palm. The dog skooches forward to gently prise the meat from Hannibal’s palm with its teeth acting like

pincers while looking up at Hannibal with its big brown eyes. Judging by how quickly the meat is eaten, the dog must like it. And it sits patiently while looking to Hannibal for another piece.

However, Hannibal stands up and wipes his palms together. He turns away from the dog to close the trunk. When he turns back around, the dog is still there. Hannibal furrows his brow but continues to the driver's side door. The dog eagerly follows him. Hannibal opens the door and gets in the car. Shutting the dog out. The dog barks once in objection, trotting to the front of the car preventing Hannibal's getaway. Another car passes the strange scene.

Hannibal sighs. He coasts the window down. The dog notices the open window and trots back to the driver's side of the car.

"Shouldn't you be getting home?"

The dog whines.

"Ahh, you're requesting a lift?"

Hannibal pops the trunk to retrieve two spare towels for the dog to sit on. The dog follows him as he exits the car and walks to the trunk, then back to the front of the car. He lays the towels down on the passenger's seat and motions to the dog to get in, who happily obliges in one swift jump. Hannibal shuts the door and then goes around to the front of the car to get in the driver's side. He shuts his door before looking for information on the tags attached to the brown leather collar.

He reaches forward. "Let's see who is responsible for you," he pauses to read the first tag. "Luna." He flicks to the other tag and grins. "Will Graham. Looks like our paths were meant to cross this evening regardless of you missing your appointment and my delicious deeds." Hannibal pats Luna and starts to drive the familiar route to Will's home.

Hannibal ques up a Bach song. The somber violin trickles out from the speakers to Luna's ears making them perk to attention. She shakes her head and starts to get restless in her seat. Hannibal sighs and changes over to something more contemporary, Creedence Clearwater Revival's Born on the Bayou. Her ears relax. She curls up on the seat, letting her front paws and head rest on the center console to gaze at Hannibal between heavy blinks. Hannibal hopes her nails won't gouge the leather even though they look recently trimmed. He reaches in his blazer pocket for his handkerchief to slide under the snoring dog's half open mouth to catch any drool that should start to leak out. Hannibal leaves his hand on the console in front of Luna's snout, surprised by the solace her warm breath on his hand brings him. He raises his hand to pet her soft head again. He thinks how easy it would be to break this quiet moment. To flick her ear or worse, take the cigarette burner to her pink nose. She would be scared at first but that would pass, especially with the help of another treat. Dogs are too trusting for their own good. Some people are too for that matter. But cruelty for cruelty's sake never did interest Hannibal.

The Bayou Country album finishes playing which Hannibal is thankful for. Luna stirs in her seat, snorting herself awake and ungracefully sits up, sending the handkerchief to the floor. She readjusts herself to look out the window. She knows that they're close now. The

Green River album starts to play. Hannibal runs his tongue along the sharp edges of his teeth as John Fogerty sings “Well, take me back down where cool water flows, y'all”. He never could have predicted that he would feel such joy from seeing Will's mailbox. Hannibal turns down the gravel driveway, slowing his speed to be mindful of the rocks pinging against his car.

He glances at the dash clock as he parks. It’s late. Late enough for all the collected strays to be asleep. Hannibal hears her swipe her wet nose across the window as she stares at the house. Luna whines, tail thudding against the seat, obviously excited to be home. He watches her for a moment, ready to sternly shush her if she starts to bark. Which Luna does not do. Hannibal avoids looking at the nose smear on his window.

Hannibal picks up the handkerchief with two fingers like tweezers, unsure of where to put it. Ultimately deciding on the same pocket with the soiled cufflink, his left trouser pocket has become the dog pocket. Hannibal gets out of the car and then lets Luna out, who rushes to the screen door, pressing her nose against the mesh and snuffling an inhale of Will’s scent. She paws at the door and then looks to Hannibal, who slowly climbs the porch steps.

“Patience.” Hannibal peeks in the windows. An eerie quiet fills the house like low hanging fog. No movement. He leans forward, listening. There’s a clatter. Something falls to the floor and shatters. A dog yelps. A sharp gasp for breath.

“Will?” Hannibal asks the darkness hiding the man.

Footsteps stumble. Another dog inside barks. Luna returns the bark and then looks to Hannibal. He nudges the dog aside and knocks on the door frame.

“Will, it’s Hannibal.” A drawer opens and slams shut. Will groans.

“Will, is everything alright?”

A body hits the floor.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will's having a difficult time controlling his murderous urges especially when it comes to Zeller.

Chapter 6

Hannibal swings the screen door open, letting it bang against the side of the house. His fingertips ghost along the edge of the splinter worn doorframe to retrieve Will's spare key. He locates his prize near a particularly sharp piece of wood jutting up.

He opens the interior door cautiously. Cool air seeps out from the dark house and surrounds his body. A faint hint of blood tinges the air around him as it dissipates into the night. Luna squeezes herself between Hannibal's legs to spring forward into the house, paws skidding across the wood floors. She finds Will immediately, going right to the dining room and licking his face. The other dogs stay huddled in the living room to keep their distance from Will who is on his hands and knees with his head lowered. His hair coils in sweaty ringlets clinging to his forehead and neck. Portions of his thin white shirt are transparent from sticking to his wet skin. The dark blue boxers pull tightly across his haunches, revealing sturdy thighs. There's drops of blood and sweat on the floor around him. Another deep groan from the back of Will's throat rumbles through the room.

"Will?" Hannibal approaches slowly, noticing a pair of scissors near Will's hand.

"I should cut it out," his voice is gruff, sleep heavy.

The scissors scrape against the wooden floor as Hannibal shoes them away from Will's splayed hand. He crouches down, seeing broken bits of glass scattered around Will's hands and bare knees. He puts a hand on the back of Will's damp neck and squeezes. With his other hand he moves the hair plastered against Will's forehead, tilting his head up. Hannibal breathes in the fevered sweetness emanating from Will's body.

Will swallows thickly, blinks slowly. The room comes into focus. Luna pushes her nose into Will's face and licks. Will huffs a laugh and exhales. Hannibal removes himself to stand in the shadows for Will to have breathing room. Will sits back on his heels and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Please don't touch your face, you may have glass in your hands."

Will whips his head towards the voice. "Hannibal? Why are you here? Did I call you?"

"You sent a messenger to me." He nods to Luna.

"She must've gotten out while I was sleepwalking. Was I saying something when you came in?"

"We can discuss that later."

"That bad, huh?"

"Only bad for the person you were dreaming about. Tell me Will, was Brian Zeller the antagonist in the theater of your mind?"

Will nods slightly but changes the subject by asking, "How did you get in anyway?"

"You left the spare in the same place when I fed your dogs the other week, which I must add, you only had five dogs then. I let myself in when I heard the commotion."

"You must enjoy humiliation." Hannibal follows Will's gaze as he scans the dishevelment of the room. Even though it's difficult to discern the destruction Will caused versus the general untidiness of unpacked boxes left by someone that can't be bothered to move in all

the way yet. Not to mention the odd placement of the bed in the living room. Hannibal assumed it was a temporary arrangement, but it's looking like the most permanent feature of the room now.

"I enjoy the courtesy of a phone call when canceling appointments."

"What time is it?" Will asks while trying to stand up. His eyes roll back as he sways.

Hannibal deftly moves forward into the pale moonlight streaming into the room to steady Will with one arm embracing his shoulder while the other wraps around his waist. They hold this pose while Will regains his balance, like two dancers embracing under a spotlight.

"It's nearly ten pm. Maybe you should sit. Would you mind if I made us some tea? After I sweep up the glass of course. We wouldn't want any paws to become injured." He leads Will to the table and chairs which Will slumps down on.

"Sounds domestic of you. Are you going to tuck me in later?" Will looks up at Hannibal through his thick lashes.

"A bedtime story too, if you behave." His eyes crinkle with delight.

They hold this tense moment between them carefully, undecided futures undulating under the surface of their vast ocean of emotions. Will breaks eye contact first by looking down at his hands, turning them over to access his palms. He also scans his bare knees. Flecks of blood and glass glitter against his skin.

"I should wash up." Will cautiously stands up, waiting a beat before walking to the half bathroom behind the kitchen with measured steps.

Hannibal watches Will walk away. He waits for the door to close before going to a closet near the side door that leads out to the porch to grab the broom and dustpan, flicking on the dining room light as he passes the switch. He tidies up efficiently and expertly before going

to the kitchen to make their tea. He's not surprised at all to find the aegean blue flannel balled up in the trash as he discards the glass.

Will listens to the clatter while leaning with his back against the closed door. He shuts his eyes, imagining how Hannibal cleans up. His strong hands gripping the broom handle with sleeves rolled up to display the muscles in his forearms flexing. A sudden flash of a hand gripping a throat. Squeezing until tendons pop. Will presses a hand to his forehead, forgetting Hannibal's warning about embedded glass. There's a bite of pain then a burn of nerves exposed to air.

"Fuck," Will breaths.

He looks at his hand. Fresh blood against his palm. The sight makes his cock twitch. He looks down disapprovingly, the pink tip of his erection poking out from the gap in his boxers. He hurries to the sink to wash his hands and face before wetting a washcloth to wipe his knees. Will avoids looking into his own eyes. He grabs a pair of pj pants from the floor, shakes them once to set the dog hair loose and puts them on. Will thinks back to how he was sitting, wondering if he was exposed. His face heats up from just the thought of embarrassment. As he leaves the bathroom, he braces himself for another round of prying questions with Hannibal.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal enjoy a cup of tea together, as only they know how by bickering.

Chapter 7

Hannibal notices Luna has stopped chewing the treat he gave her. Her ears perk up and she leaves the warmth of her bed. She goes to the hallway and rounds the corner to look for Will. Hannibal hears Will laugh and the jingle of her collar. She trots back to her bed and continues gnawing her treat. The other dogs remain unbothered by her antics, totally engaged with their own snacks.

Now that Will is back, Hannibal feigns ignorance of Will's cabinets as if he hadn't already snooped through everything the last time he was here.

Will cocks a brow. "Quite familiar with the innards of my home, aren't we doctor?"

Hannibal turns to Will and frowns. "Are you accusing me of something, Will?"

Will shakes his head. "Not at all." He pauses walking to smile a little at Hannibal before continuing back to the table. He sits on the still pulled out chair.

"Since you missed our session and we're technically only having conversations, would you like to pick up where we left off last week?" Hannibal finishes setting up the mugs with the tea bags, he reminds himself to introduce Will to some finer tea options. Hannibal sits at the table with Will to wait for the water to boil.

“I’m a bit hazy as to where we left off last time.” Will rests his elbows on the table, leaning into his hands to massage his traps.

Hannibal coyly admires the flex and bulge of Will’s biceps. It didn’t pass his notice that Will is wearing a thin white t-shirt. He is disappointed however, that Will choose to put pants on. He liked the casualness of the boxers. Among other things.

“Then maybe a change in subject is in order. Would you like to talk about what happened at the lab today?”

Will leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. He shakes his head no. The water starts to boil. Hannibal gets up to address the shrill scream of the kettle, ever thankful that Will owns a kettle, and he wasn’t forced to microwave the water.

“When I came into the house you were saying that you should cut it out and there were a pair of scissors near your hand. Were you referring to cutting out Brian Zeller’s tongue since he was so careless with his words today?”

Will sighs. “These are just conversations? Between you and me only? No documentation or notes to share with Jack?” His voice is tense.

Hannibal makes sure to look at Will as he answers. “Everything you have and will say to me will remain confidential. Any notes are abstracted enough to never be connected to you. And I only share the mildest of vagaries to keep Jack content with this arrangement.”

Will nods. “Quid pro quo, then Hannibal. What were you referring to when you said he's more than one serving?”

“Are you sure that's what you heard?” Hannibal turns from Will to busy himself with the tea preparation. He puts the tea bags into the kettle to steep before grabbing a small saucepan from a lower cabinet.

“We both know you said it. Look, I can't be honest with you if you aren't honest with me.”

Hannibal opens the fridge to grab the carton of milk, quickly checking the date then shaking it lightly before pouring half a cups worth into the saucepan. He turns the heat to low. Then sets to rummaging through the spices to add dashes of ginger and cinnamon along with a squeeze of honey. A fork whisks everything together.

“You wouldn't happen to have a milk frother, would you?” Hannibal asks.

“A milk frother? Oh, yeah it's next to the espresso machine.” Will sarcastically retorts.

Hannibal frowns and goes back to whisking with a fork.

“Hannibal,” Will says.

“If I said what you think you heard, what would you postulate from such a remark?” He continues gently whisking the milk into a froth.

Blood pulses loudly in Will’s ears, signaling rising blood pressure.

“I really can’t say,” Will replies.

“Pity. I was ready to lay the world at your feet.”

Will creases his brow but refuses to take the bait.

Hannibal pours the steeped tea into the mugs and then layers the spiced milk on top. Carrying the mugs to the table with an arrogant air from triumphantly making something from the meager selection Will has to offer.

Will peers into his mug.

“I thought you were making tea?”

“This is a honey chamomile latte. Soothing for the nerves.” Hannibal takes a hesitant sip.

Will sighs. “Nothing's ever simple with you, is it?” He sips his mug, annoyed with how delicious it is. “This is good. Thank you. I usually just splash some bourbon in my tea and call it a night.”

“I recently acquired a whisky you may like. The tasting notes are moss, smoke and vanilla.”

“I think I can postulate this one, you were going to pour me some after our session tonight?” Will takes mischievous joy in spotting the several tufts of dog hair clinging to Hannibal’s crisp blazer.

Hannibal smirks. “Of course. You didn't seem too fond of the red wine from last week.”

“You know, for a psychiatrist, you seem to enjoy blurring boundaries, when I’m pretty sure Jack retained you to do the opposite. I wonder what would happen if your patients compared notes.”

Will scans Hannibal’s face to try to gauge his reaction to the blunt observation. But it’s as if a thin veil is draped over his features, there’s something happening underneath, rippling the fabric. It makes Will think of *The Veiled Virgin,* by Giovanni Strazza, the right shapes are there for a face, however he can’t help but feel that if the veil were to be lifted the thing revealed wouldn’t be human at all.

“I must confess that it’s a habit I picked up from my psychiatrist, who is also a colleague and a friend.”

Will puts his mug down and leans towards Hannibal, engulfing him in a hazy cloud scented with anxiety sweat, motor oil and dog. Hannibal finds the combination unassumingly charming.

“Did you really drive an hour out here to check up on me because I missed my appointment?”

“Yes. Especially considering the confrontation you had with Brian.”

Will huffs and leans back. “Jack must really want me on a short leash if you feel like a pissing contest with a colleague is going to,” Will trails off.

“Going to what?” Hannibal takes another long pull from his mug.

“I don't know. Whatever Jack thinks I'm capable of since I'm unstable or could become unstable. Which wasn’t a problem when I was just lecturing. But now that I’m a field investigator it matters. Wouldn’t want to tarnish his good name.” Will is transfixed watching Hannibal’s throat swallow a mouthful of hot tea.

“Do you truly believe that you are unstable?” Hannibal asks.

Will frowns and tries to refocus. “Doesn’t matter what I think, it’s in the screening report. You’re asking a lot of questions. This feels more like an interrogation, not a conversation.”

“Maybe another change in topic then. Something easier to digest. A little lab gossip?”

Will chokes on a mouthful of tea. He recovers. “I didn’t take you for a tittle-tattle.”

“I merely observe and internalize. Occasionally intervene. Rarely report.”

“I’m the exception then? Your confidant?” The half sass, half genuine smile on Will’s lips falls when he sees the inscrutable look Hannibal wears.

“For you Will, anything.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal have a misunderstanding.

Chapter Notes

tw/cw homophobic slur, self harm mention

Chapter 8

Will stares at Hannibal. The room suddenly feels humid even though the hairs on Will's forearms are bristled from some unseen chill. Feelings are brimming, swirling between them and threatening to boil over. He takes a steady breath to gather his wits when what he really wants to do is taste the tea from Hannibal's plush lips.

Will clears his throat to release the question that won't stop nagging him.

"Anything? Including what you said about Zeller being more than one serving?"

Hannibal sighs. "If you can give me any notions that you have, then I can answer yes or no."

Will shakes his head and casts his eyes down at the table.

“He has a date this evening. I can’t help but feel a strange mix of sympathy and an urge to assist whomever he coerced into having dinner with him.”

Puzzled with Hannibal’s response, Will pulls his brows together in thought. His eyes get wide when a realization dawns on him.

“What exactly are you implying? Because I’d rather you just say it out right instead of these fucking riddles all the time.”

Hannibal remains at ease, although he does enjoy hearing vulgarity from Will's lips almost as much as the Latin.

“I think there’s a misunderstanding at play here. What a shame to ruin such a cozy evening between friends.”

“Friends?” Will repeats while chewing his bottom lip. “You use that word like a loaded spring. Are you too refined to say what you mean? Gay. Homosexual. There I said it for you. Or do you prefer something more derogatory? Like faggot.” He slams a closed fist down on the table, rattling the mugs. Luckily, the tea levels are low enough, so nothing spills out.

Hannibal pushes his chair back to gain distance from the table, unsure of what Will will do next. A portion of his hair becomes disheveled from the quick movement, shading over his brow while still upholding his side part.

“I’m just about worn out with all of you. With everything if I’m being honest.” Will locks eyes with Hannibal. “That’s your cue to leave. Exit stage left. Thanks for the insightful evening.”

Hannibal gets up from his chair and buttons his blazer. “I’m sorry to have caused you distress Will. That was not my intention. Please rest up. I have a feeling tomorrow will be a hectic day at the lab.” Hannibal smooths back his hair to its rightful position.

He leaves the house, glancing one last time at a sullen Will sat at the table alone as he pulls the door shut behind him. He tsks to himself as he walks to his Bentley. Will is proving to be far more difficult to manipulate than anyone he's encountered before. A challenge, surely. But to what end? Hannibal was intrigued by Will's frankness the first time they met. Some would call Will rude. They're wrong. Rude implies intention. Will doesn't aim to hurt with his words. He just lets them loose like a pack of wild dogs. It's your choice to get out of the way or not. Hannibal admires the carelessness of it. The ease of not meticulously brooding over details to uphold this imago of a well-respected person. Complete with a career, a house with beautiful things, lavish meals. Eaten primarily alone. Lacking meaningful connections. Unconditional love.

Enough of that. He starts the car and cringes when Creedence Clearwater Revival auto plays through the speakers, singing, "you're gonna find the world is smoldering". Hannibal immediately switches over to Bach. After carefully reversing out of Will's narrow driveway, Hannibal steps heavily on the gas pedal, enjoying the distraction and rush of speeding down a back country road with only the guiding light of the limited reach of his headlights against the darkness.

Will listens to the engine rev as Hannibal races off into the night while he cradles his head in his hands. He imagines the darkness swallowing Hannibal up, never to see him again. All because he's feeling insecure and threatened by the mere idea of friendship. Bullshit.

Will tenses his hands, digging the tips of his fingers into his scalp. He springs up from his chair and reaches for Hannibal's mug. He brings the mug to his lips, careful to not rotate it. He wants to place his lips where Hannibal's rested. Will lets his bottom lip kiss the mug. He tips the mug and drinks what Hannibal left behind, filling his mouth with the lukewarm liquid to gather upon his tongue before swallowing slowly. Will opens his mouth to let his tongue lick away the imprint of Hannibal's lip. He exhales a shaky breath.

"What am I doing?" He shakes his head and puts the mug down.

He rushes up the stairs to one of the empty bedrooms and quietly closes the door as to let sleeping dogs lie. Will paces with heavy breaths. He picks up a spare pillow from an open box on the floor and holds it against his face to scream into, releasing a day's worth of tension into its fibers. Unsatisfied, he tosses the pillow back into the box where it falls undecidedly, half in half out. He continues pacing, knowing exactly what will relieve this energy but refusing to give in. Not tonight. He eyes a wall. But the plaster proved to be too soft the last time as the dent from his fist shows. Will thinks back to the scissors in the kitchen drawer. He looks down at his thigh, thankful it's covered to resist the temptation to

cut. Will drops to his knees and takes a breath. The fingers of his left hand clench and tighten. Will slams his knuckles against the hard wooden floor. Once. Then again. The strike reverberates in his wrist bones up to his shoulder. Once more. He falls forward, splaying his palms flat against the floor, letting his neck relax and his head to lower.

Everyone has thought about killing someone.

Will holds his breath until his face turns red. He gives in once his throat feels raw.

“Fuck.” He spits out loudly in the dark room.

He gets up and grabs a discarded henley from another open box. He puts on a pair of socks found from the floor. Then he changes out of the thin pj bottoms and back into the pants he wore to work. Will goes to leave his room, snatching his folded glasses from his dresser as he exits, mindful of avoiding the mirror hanging on the back of the door. He opens the door to nearly step on Luna.

“I have to go out. I will be back. I promise.” He steps around her.

She follows at his heels down the stairs and to the front door. He shrugs on a coat from the rack next to the door. Luna sits and watches him. She stays in front of the door even after it’s closed, and Will is gone. She stays until she can’t hear the low rumble of his car anymore.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Will needs a drink and a little company.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the short chapter. Perhaps I can alleviate the disappointment with another chapter shortly.

Chapter 9

Will makes the relatively short drive into town, shuffling through his options along the way. He can't go to the same bar he went to last time. That would be reckless. Instead, he picks a new place where the parking is terrible and it's easier to follow someone without being noticed.

He pulls his unassuming Volvo station wagon into a side alley to park in a lot with minimal streetlights. There're a few other lone cars here, an Audi and a BMW, since the parking is free and the drinks at the Barrel can be a little steep. Save money where you can. But Will isn't going to the Barrel. The Barrel is well lit and still has that new construction smell. Management even took it upon themselves to install bouncers in various spots after the knife fight at the Shaughnessy's Pub.

The place Will walks the two blocks to has dim lighting with dark corners, no dress code and a false security camera that blinks dumbly over the bar. The sidewalk is still dotted with people, even at this hour. He feels something expand deep within his chest, coming to full height within him.

A man exits Shaughnessy's Pub while Will enters, holding the door for Will.

“Thanks,” Will mumbles with the frame of his glasses angled just so to block out the man’s face.

The man is already on his way, not even giving Will a second glance. Will continues into the cacophony of the bar. Old cigarette smoke stickily hangs in the air from when it was legal to smoke inside. It makes his nostrils burn. He takes a seat at the bar between a burly man and a guy wearing jeans that look suffocatingly tight. The bearded bartender, complete with wax twirled mustache, is prompt to take his request since it’s that time of night when everyone is well into their drinks and fighting the spins.

“Well bourbon and ginger ale please.” He lays a five on the counter, which isn’t the least bit tacky from neglect.

Will pulls out his phone and puts it on the counter. He debates his next move while looking over the other people seated at the bar. At the far end are two young blonde women, most likely college students escaping campus for a little privacy to let off some steam. They lean close into each other, bare knees touching, one whispering to the other so that she throws her head back to laugh, exposing her lovely slender throat. They look happy and mostly unbothered by the select stares from several of the men. One of them, or maybe both must be carrying something for safety. If this were Minnesota and they were brunette, Will might give them his contact info. He looks at his phone, expecting it to ring as if Jack can feel him thinking about work. He decides to text Hannibal.

What’s the name of the whiskey you bought?

The bartender returns with Will’s drink. He drains half of it in one swallow, welcoming the sting.

Mongoose

Will smiles at the speedy response. He finishes his drink and signals the bartender over.

“Do you carry mongoose whiskey?”

“Yeah,” he hesitates. “Do you want one on the rocks or neat?”

“Neat please.” Will reaches for his wallet.

“It’s thirty.”

Will looks at the barkeep with raised brows. He plucks two twenties and places them on the bartop.

“Keep the change.”

This gets the attention of the man to his right, the burly one. He swivels his head around to look Will over.

The bartender goes to a glass display cabinet and enters a combination on the lock. As he opens the glass door lights illuminate the bottom of the case. He gingerly reaches for the bottle. A pop sounds as he uncorks the bottle. A careful measure is poured into a glass. He slides the drink over to Will. Will nods at him. He lifts the glass to let the dim overhead light shine through the amber hue. Will brings the glass closer, inhaling the aroma of the tasting notes. Campfire. Velvet green. He takes a tentative sip. Vanilla. Real vanilla. Not the kind made from oily chemicals. Cherries. The liquor rests on his tongue for a moment before he swallows. Will closes his eyes to fully enjoy the warmth tumbling down to his belly. He reopens his eyes and sighs.

“That good, huh?” The man on his right chuckles slightly.

“You tell me.” Will calls for the barkeep to come back before he spirits the bottle away.

“One for my friend here, please.” He plucks another set of twenties out from his wallet.

The burly man shakes his head. “Nahh man, that’s okay.” But the way he shifts in his seat to angle his body towards Will says otherwise.

“The cat’s already out of the bag. Can’t put him back in again.” Will’s eyes slide over the man, assessing his body, his strength. He would be strong. His hands are large and calloused with knobby knuckles. His back is broad with well-muscled arms. This man probably does something physical for a living, odds and ends, construction, tree felling. Possibly difficult to handle given his height and weight. But the human body has weak soft spots. Knees, throat, genitals.

The bartender drops off the drink. The man looks to Will as he lifts his glass and takes a sip. He nods his head in approval.

“Yeah, it’s that good. Thanks man.”

Will raises his glass to clink it against the man’s glass.

“What’s life without a little indulgence now and again?” He smiles, then gets up from the bar with both of his drinks to take a seat at a booth in the back that just became vacant.

The man watches Will for a moment before returning to his own ruminations.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Will makes a selection at the bar and sees a connection between the co-ed abductor and the Chesapeake Ripper.

Chapter Notes

hello constant readers! we're now officially heading into darker territory, in case that's not your thing. and this chapter is looooonger....

also, can i like squee for a moment here? i'm so happy for all the comments and interactions with you! i really appreciate your kudos and subscriptions. not to sound too dramatic but it's nice seeing feedback when you don't have any tangible people to share this with.

tw/cw sexual content, violent thoughts, possibly buzzed driving [which the writer does not condone; while masturbating while thinking about murder is perfectly acceptable ;)]

Chapter 10

Will watches the various people in the bar from his post in the back get sloppier as the night lurches onward. A woman with long dark hair that brushes against her pale exposed cleavage kisses the neck of her razor thin boyfriend after throwing a drink at him. She missed entirely to drench the man behind him who didn’t take kindly to the liquor shower and went to make this known to the dark-haired women. The thin boyfriend stepped in between them with a full foot of height shadowing down on him. Her dark eyes meet Will’s for a moment while she whispers in the boyfriend’s ear as her hand grips the back of his neck, his tattoos are whispers of ink against his dark skin. Will feels the charged words against his own ear like the blinking of a red neon light.

The burly, lonely man Will left at the bar occasionally peaks over his shoulder to seek out someone to talk to, anyone that can spare a minute to just listen for once. He waits. A younger man leaves the restroom, sweeping his hair back as he walks. He stares straight

ahead. Less than a minute later another man trails behind him, eyes wide when he swipes at the bottom of his chin. His new boots crackle against his speedy stride as he passes Will. Shame sometimes smells like semen.

The lesser whiskey was drained almost as soon as Will sat down. He's been savoring Hannibal's selection while he surveys the crowd. The man with the tight jeans gets up from the bar to close out his tab. Will can tell that he leaves a shitty tip by the downward turn of the bartender's wax twirled mustache. The man purposefully adjusts his shirt, revealing a belt holster containing a mean looking knife. Will gets up after the man leaves and follows him.

He stays several dozen feet away, hanging back among the shadows of the side streets and store fronts. The man ambles, in no hurry to get home. He stumbles once, curses. He looks over his shoulder. Will darts into the doorway of a store. He breaths evenly. The man continues walking. Will waits, counting to sixty before emerging. The man turns down a street, picking up his pace to get to a house. Will pulls out his phone, pretending to text as he watches the man falter up the few steps to get to the porch. He struggles to get his key in the lock for a minute and then he's inside his home. Will takes off his glasses and tucks them into the front pocket of his coat.

The living room light goes on. Will moves forward. He sneaks to an open window at the side of the house with plenty of strategically planted evergreen shrubs at the property border to provide cover from the neighbor's windows. He hears a faucet turn on and gulps of water being swallowed. The light goes out. A few moments later a light goes on upstairs. Will finds a stick on the ground. He uses this to tear into the window screen. He tosses it to the ground before prizing the screen from the frame. He opens the window more, enough for him to shimmy into the kitchen. He hoists himself up, careful to not disturb the trash cans huddled together adjacent to the window.

Will steps down from the window into the unfamiliar house. The smell of stale clothing and trash that needs to be taken out overwhelms Will. He takes a few more tentative steps further into the house. The strong scent of a cologne that Hannibal would find even more offensive than his own congregates around the foot of the stairs. He glances around, listening to every offering of sound the house will give him. There's the rustle of a blanket from upstairs. A ticking somewhere in the next room over. The refrigerator kicks on. He goes to the fridge and peeks inside. Nothing too interesting. He helps himself to a bottle of water before quietly closing the door. He stands in front of the fridge, looking over the various magnets and coupons attached to the door. A message on the board reads, "trash pickup tomorrow." Different handwriting below states, "it's jerry's turn." No note to signal confirmation from Jerry is on the board. Will removes the whiteboard with its marker from the fridge. He goes back to the kitchen counter, putting down the whiteboard and marker before retrieving the glass that was left next to the sink. Will unzips his pants and positions

the glass in front of him. A steady stream of piss fills the glass. He tucks himself back into his pants and then places the glass back on the kitchen counter next to the whiteboard. Will reaches in his wallet for his last twenty. He scrubs the messages away with the flat of his fist and places the twenty on the whiteboard.

He writes, **for next time jerry**.

Will lets himself out via the backdoor, closing it louder than necessary. He gets to the edge of the backyard when the upstairs light pings on. He stops to listen. There's a flurry on the steps. Will crouches behind a bush just as the kitchen light comes on.

"Mike, is that you? I thought you were staying over at Hannah's tonight?" An unsteady voice asks.

More heavy steps.

"Come on man, where you at? Ugh, what the fuck?" A gagging noise. "Fucking piss?!" The glass shatters into the sink.

Will gets up and briskly walks out of the backyard as the man continues to shout. He takes a side street that will lead him back to his car in a more roundabout manner. His body hums with delight. He reminds himself to slow his walking pace as he passes a couple with arms draped around each other, long blonde hair trailing behind them like comets.

Once he's enclosed in the safety of his car, Will allows this high to engulf him, gripping the steering wheel with firm hands to tether himself to the moment. His thighs rush and tingle with pleasure, pooling in the heat of his lap. A stray thought needles through to burst this champagne feeling. *If you like this, then you'll love what can happen next.*

Will starts the car so that the engine noises crowd out his thoughts. His nerves still buzz, so much so that it's difficult to sit still while he drives. He needs more time to settle before going back to the darkness of a lonely house. Tires skid as he takes a sudden right for the longer route home. Back here it's one lane country roads that run parallel to civilization. He makes a sharp left to a place he knows where people dump dogs. The engine dies, pinging last breaths

of heat to fight against the chill of the night air. Will opens the dash compartment to retrieve a homemade bag of treats. He takes several handfuls to fill his coat pockets with before replacing the bag to the dash. He gets out of the car and walks further from what could've happened. He needs this distraction to keep from going back to the shitty-tipper's house and killing him.

The gravel is loud underfoot in the quiet of the night. He peaks into the large shed near where he parked first, the rust hinged door practically falling off the door frame. Oil tattoos the dirt in blotches. Will wonders what they would look like if he could gain the perspective to see their grand plan. He could even report back to Hannibal what he saw in the Rorschach of spilled car oil as he tried to suppress his more animalistic instincts.

Will continues onward, stopping at a nearly hollowed out car, all the important parts taken some time ago. This is where he found Zoe huddled into a tight ball of fear and anger. No tags, no collar, all teeth set in an adorable under-bite. It took several baths to get the oil out of her belly fur. She tried to bite his forearm during the second bath but ended up resting her teeth around his arm like she was holding on to him as she looked up at him with her big bulging eyes.

He walks to the pile of rusted junk bordering the woods and crouches, peering through the spaces to look for paws or a tail. Will stands up and sighs. Hell, at this point he'd even take a cat if only they weren't so feral and skittish. He eyes the woods and decides to walk a little further into the night.

It smells like a different place under the canopy of trees. Clean and pure. The wet earth gives off a nourishing aroma. The katydids chirp out their never-ending chorus, arguing that Katy did or she didn't. The tree crickets add the background hum. Frogs croak lowly. Will feels something brush across the back of his neck. Undeterred, he walks on. He starts to feel calmer from bathing in the nighttime forest. Will tries to find the moon between the leaves of the trees. A twig snaps to his left. Will pauses. Another dry crack of splintering wood. He scans the trees for movement, craning his neck forward. He daringly takes another step. The insect chorus quiets. There's a crashing crescendo of breaking branches and hollow ground being trampled upon. Will feels a gust of air rush past him, crossing to the other side of the path before he registers what he sees. He leaves the safety of the worn path to pursue the creature, gaining confidence and speed with each heavy fall of steps. Will grabs a slim tree trunk for balance as he almost steps off level ground to tumble down the decline below. His eyes try to locate the animal, searching frantically and making false faces from the shadows and leaves. He hears a bellow. Will edges along the trees, using branches for support. Then he spots him. He's beautiful. Velvety black fur with impressive antlers, white enough to be carved from bone. The sika stag dips his head low to sip from the stream. Will holds his breath. He feels a tickling run along his fingers. He glances down to see a marbled orb

weaver spider trailing along his skin. Will tries to blow the spider off but it merely repels safely with its silk. Will shakes his arm and the spider flies off, he loses his footing for a moment, noisily stamping leaves and twigs.

The stag stops drinking and looks in Will's direction, seemingly locking eyes. The stag throws his head back and lets loose a multi-pitched wail. Will stills. Veins coursing icy blood to his fingertips. The stag calls out a warning bark at Will, who decides to turn back to his car. He hurries without regard to keep quiet. Branches reach for him, tugging his coat, pulling at his hair. Will huffs shallowly against the oppressive quiet.

He emerges from the woods and shakes out his hair. Then he dusts off his coat sleeves and pants before getting into his car. After an hour or so and no new stray to bring home, Will falls back on plan b, palms getting hot with the itch of anticipation. He keeps reminding himself to drive within the speed limit to avoid getting pulled over since cops like to hide out to catch drunk drivers and he did have two drinks. Will opens the stolen bottle of water and takes a healthy chug.

Will finally parks his car in front of his dark house. He waits several minutes before getting out, taking half breaths while listening to the hammer of his heart. He gets out of the car and is inside his house in no time. All the dogs are sleeping. Except for Luna. A tail wag and a lick to the hand greet Will. She jabs her wet nose against his coat pocket to get at the treats stashed inside. Will shoos her away so he can take off his coat and kick off his shoes. Undeterred, she goes right back to the coat hanging on the rack to mouth at the pocket. Luna does a little jump to lift her front half higher to get into the pocket. Her nose jams into the pocket and she panics, sending the whole rack crashing to its side. The rest of the pack startles awake. Zoe starts to bark anxiously which sends Buster into a whining fit. Jack and Max rush over to inspect the fallen coat rack. They start barking at Luna once they notice her eating the spilled treats. Looking for comfort, Winston rushes to Will's side and sits on one of his socked feet. Harley digs at his blanket while making keening noises which usually signals he's going to piss due to stress. Ellie barrels her way between Jack and Max's argument with Luna for the unoccupied pocket still containing treats.

Will clenches his jaw at this circus of interruptions. He whistles once to get everyone's attention as he walks to the kitchen. They all sit patiently as Will doles out treats. Then he lets them all outside for a quick piss and to run off some of their energy. Harley barely makes it to the shrub to relieve himself in time.

Once they are all in, Will briefly gives each dog his undivided attention for a few minutes. The pact finally settles with heavy heads resting on paws or pillows or each other.

Will takes a deep breath. Standing in the living room he waits. The moon shyly reveals herself from behind a cluster of clouds. She's fuller tonight, becoming more of herself. Will watches the moon with hot palms. His whole body feels like it's vibrating. Will hurries upstairs, two at a time without gripping the railing for support, to the privacy of what should be his bedroom.

He shuts the door and steps back to see himself in the mirror. The moon illuminates the room easily since there are no curtains to filter out her glow, her fingers teasing the edges of Will's hair like a halo. Will palms the front of his pants, his knees buckle a little. He takes off his henley and tosses it to the floor soon followed by his white t-shirt, he wants to see the moon gleam against his bare body. The scar on his shoulder from when he was stabbed while on the New Orleans police force is a pale highlight across his skin. He rests his right palm on the door next to the mirror, if he uses his dominant hand this will be over too soon. Then he'll have to take out another hundred from the atm and do it all again just to keep these urges at bay. Like throwing scraps into the gaping maw of an alligator, Will knows there will come a time when the stalking, collecting strays and masturbating won't be enough. He sighs and shakes his head, trying to refocus. He wants to silence these persistent thoughts with the white-hot static of edging his orgasm until his legs are quivering and his stomach feels like live wires.

Will widens his stance and palms his hard erection. He runs his hand across his lower stomach, teasing before dipping his hand down his pants. Will cups his balls, the rasp of fabric catches on his sensitive skin. He tightens his grip before moving his attentions to his shaft. Will tries to control his breathing. His fingertips dance along the edge of the waistband of his boxers. He slides two fingers down to tentatively pull his cock, thumbing the tip to spread precome across it. His eyes flutter close, hips stutter forward seeking pressure. He pauses to lean further into his aching right arm and palm. Will lets his head drop. He shoves his entire hand down the front of his pants and tightly grips his cock, slowly fisting his hand up and down. There isn't enough space for his ministrations, his forearm starts to chafe from the friction. Shaky breaths cloud in the quiet room, while sweat rolls languidly between his shoulder blades.

There're too many threads of thoughts weaving across the loom of his imagination. He picks one to follow. If someone were to shine a light into his ear, this is the play they would see.

Will emerges from the darkest corner of the shitty-tipper's kitchen just after he throws the piss filled glass into the sink. A groaning floorboard announces his presence, ruining the surprise. The man turns to Will, fear drains the color from his face and makes the hair on his

bare arms stand on end. Will smiles, feeling electric. Will continues to move forward. The man takes a step back in reply.

"*W-wwwhat are you doing here?"*

"*Shhh. No, no. You don't need to speak yet. Not until I tell you to. Let's go upstairs."*

The man tries to turn away from Will to run from the room, but Will lunges forward and seizes him by the shoulders, driving his knee into the man's stomach. He folds forward, mouth open in a desperate gasp for air. Will shoves him to the floor.

Hips roll forward and his hand is frantic, fumbling and losing grip. He draws in a deep breath to still his movements, wanting this to last. Will removes his hand from his cock and stands upright sending blood to rush back to his tingly right arm. He unbuttons and then unzips his pants, sliding them off to lay in a heap on the floor. Next, he pulls off his socks and moves them closer to his pants. Will runs his hands through his hair to keep in this moment. He watches himself as fingertips hover over the top of his boxers before he pulls them down and steps out of them. It feels like his whole body is singing, nerves in harmony with the delicate hum of the moon. Moments like these make Will feel like he is capable of anything. Righteous. Will inhales a deep breath and watches his chest expand. He takes his heavy cock into his left hand, squeezing the base and then sliding his hand up and down. He grips the top of his inner thigh with his right hand. Will picks another thread to follow.

Will forces Brian to kneel with his hand roughly gripping his hair.

"*Wider," Will demands.*

Brian compiles but doesn't have the time to adjust as his mouth becomes full. Bleach drips down the back of his throat. Will pulls Brian's head back further to look down at his eyes full of tears.

"*Say something," Will says.*

Brian swallows and tries to speak around the balled-up fabric.

"*Try harder. Say something.*"

Brian's face turns red from effort. His throat beetle-clicks dryly, knowing he's been cornered by a predator, as he tries to swallow. A thin stream of saliva leaves the side of his mouth. There's a scalpel in Will's free hand which he slides across Brian's throat. The meat separates smoothly. Warm blood oozes out from the wound and over Will's hand. It smells like the cheap copper pot Will's dad would use to heat up canned beans for dinner most nights, maybe with a slab of toast.

Will starts to lose coordination. His hips thrust forward into his hand. He tries to slow his pace a little. Just a little longer.

Will lifts Brian to his feet by grabbing the collar of his polo. Brian grasps uselessly at his throat to try to stifle the blood. Will stares into his steely blue eyes while pulling him closer. Will leans forward, pausing for a moment, before resting his lips upon the other man's bottom lip. He tastes cinnamon. Will pulls back, now staring into the maroon abyss of Hannibal Lecter's eyes.

"*Let me see you,*" *Hannibal says.*

He closes the space between them by sealing their mouths together. Their tongues slide against one another. Hannibal breaks away from their kiss to lift Will's blood sticky hand up to his face. He selects Will's middle finger, bringing it to his mouth to glide it between his lips. Once fully inside, he swirls his tongue around Will's finger to suck and swallow the blood from it. Hannibal removes Will's finger from his mouth.

"*I told you he's more than one serving. Shall I set the table?*"

Crime scene photos gallop across the terrain of Will's thoughts. The three missing women from his latest case; Delilah Woodward, Alice Anderson, Rachel Winn. All brunette, all medium height and build. All pretty girl next door. Not a scrap left behind. When you like something, why change it? An arrow threads through Jeremy Olmstead's head. His liver and

thymus taken. Karen Kramer, chest cavity open, kidneys taken. Rodger Malone, abdomen sliced open, pancreas missing. Food is food, his dad would say whenever Will struggled to eat the fried hunks of alligator liver on his oil soaked paper plate. Sweetbreads. He's eating them. The Chesapeake Ripper isn't keeping surgical trophies, he's sautéing them. Just like the co-ed abductor isn't collecting teenage girls. He's finding new ones to replace his dinner. Will cries out in a mix of pain and pleasure. He angles his cock against his stomach and tries to contain his release with his free hand. His knees weaken as he orgasms, almost falling forward. He lets his head roll back as he stills his shuddering breaths against the faint smell of bleach, gathering himself back together. Will ungainly hobbles to the bathroom to clean himself off in a quick cold shower. He tries to stay in this moment of loose limbs and heady head. But the lovely, uncoiled feeling in his stomach turns to ice. And the water feels like icicles daggering his skin and even deeper, to his heart as Will stands still with his realization.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Jack demands Will's attendance at a crime scene where a body was found in a barn. Hannibal insists on carpooling to discuss the previous evening.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lapse in updating.

Chapter 11

One of the phones on the stand next to the bed starts to ping and vibrate. The noises fail to rouse Will from his deep slumber. The vibration and message notification noises sound again, the screen dimly illuminating the dark room. If Will were to check his government issued cell phone, he would see the messages are about another body that was found in a barn. The phone vibrates again but this time a ringtone plays loudly signaling that Jack is calling. The harsh siren song screams to be answered, seemingly for two minutes before going quiet. Will groans and turns away from the phone, knocking into Luna who huffs at the intrusion. He doesn't remember making it back downstairs to sleep in his bed. The phone vibrates again meaning that Jack left a voicemail. He shuts his eyes while pulling the thin sheet over his head, engulfed by the smell of dirty dog paws. The house phone starts to ring. It's only four in the morning, the sun hasn't even started to rise. Will opens his sleep swollen eyes, flings the sheet off his body and rolls over to the stand beside his bed. The phone vibrates and rings in his hand as he picks it up.

"Sorry Jack, I was letting the dogs out." Will lies.

"Rough night Graham? You sound like shit."

Jack's voice always has the power to thunder. No matter how terrible the cell service or how many people are stuffed into a room. Jack thunders.

"Better night than this new victim." Will puts Jack on speaker as he quickly thumbs through the crime scene photos while still laying down.

"Tell me what you see," Jack says.

Let me see you. Will nearly drops the phone.

"Graham?" Jack asks.

"Yeah, I'm here Jack. I've got this new dog and she's awfully needy."

Luna paws at Will's arm and lets out a single bark before jumping down from the bed. Her nose indignantly raised as she leaves the living room.

"Better yet. Show me what you see. I really would prefer to have you at the scene. I feel like you'll concentrate better there," Jack says.

"Hannibal hasn't approved me for field work yet, Jack. It isn't advisable for me to be there in person. I've got my pictures. That's all I really need." Will scrubs a hand across his face.

"Any progress on the co-ed abductor?"

Will swings his legs over the side of the bed and sits up.

“I umm, yeah,” Will huffs a laugh. “I think he might be eating them.” Will closes his eyes while waiting for Jack’s response.

“And what am I supposed to do with that information?”

Will slowly reopens his eyes.

The same thing that information does to Will. Let it seep into your dreams the next time you lay down next to your wife or better yet the next time you tuck into a burger.

“Start a running list of hunting licenses in Minnesota against applications to the colleges where the women went missing. Or medical licenses. A profession that would know how to carve up a body. He could be a butcher. Maybe he’s got a daughter. If he’s gone this long without detection that means he has a private place to bring them to. No one would think twice about dear old dad making venison jerky up at the hunting cabin for the weekend.”

Jack sighs. “Makes sense, I couldn’t stand to be around one teenage girl, let alone three. Soon to be four. But I need more than that Will. We’re coming up on the four-week mark. He’s going to take another.”

“I’m doing the best that I can, especially since more cases keep being added to my workload. I’m balancing writing lectures and keeping office hours with helping you do your job.”

Jack clears his throat. “I did not just hear that.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Good. I’ll talk with Douglass, see if we can get you a couple of TAs.”

“I don’t want TAs Jack,” Will says.

“Then you best start solving some of my cases. I still haven’t received your report about the daisy case,” Jack says.

Will stands up. “Any progress on the Ripper case, Jack?”

“Excuse me?” Will can practically hear Jack’s eyebrows shoot up in anger.

“Any idea where Miriam might be? It’s been almost two years now. What do you say to her family when they call for updates? What kind of trophies do you think he kept from her? Do you think he stores them in an embalming jar on a shelf to look at while he sharpens his scalpel?”

“You’re on thin fucking ice Will. Careful you don’t fall through. Get dressed. I’ll be in touch with Dr. Lecter shortly. And hire a goddamned dog sitter!” Jack hangs up, missing the days when you could slam the receiver down for added effect.

Will waits a respectable two minutes before calling Hannibal.

“Will? Is everything alright?” His voice isn’t even the least bit sleep heavy.

Will quietly clears his throat, aware of the fact that he did not drink enough water yet this morning.

“I need you to rubber stamp me.” Will presses the phone hard against his ear to listen to the background noises of Hannibal’s domestic life. But all Will can hear is the static of silence. Either his phone is blocking out the background noise or Hannibal enjoys quiet mornings. Probably sitting at the table with breakfast and coffee while sketching birds nesting outside his window. And Will just shattered that calm like a rock thrown through a church’s stained glass window.

"Is this about Jack Crawford's request for your presence at the latest crime scene?"

"No one does this better, unbroken than I do broken. I need to be there. The photos aren't enough. And I can't concentrate with all of the bickering in the lab." Will paces in his living room which riles the dogs.

"Contrary to what Jack believes, I do not consider you to be broken at all."

Will takes a deep breath. "Well, good. Then you should feel no moral reservations about signing off on that letter. You can bring it to the crime scene. I'll meet you there."

"Will, shouldn't we discuss what transpired last night?"

Hannibal sliding Will's finger into his mouth replays in his mind causing Will to unintentionally step on Winston's tail when he abruptly stops pacing. Winston skitters off, knocking into Will's recliner which sends a precariously balanced book on the chair's arm to fall to the floor. Zoe starts to bark anxiously. Will briskly walks to the half bath, noticing that the coat rack is still laying on its side on the floor. He ignores this for now and shuts himself in the bathroom. He moves the phone away from his mouth as he sighs.

"I umm. Can't we save it for our therapy session? I can do two this week to make up for missing yesterday."

On the other side of the phone Hannibal frowns. He puts down the pencil he's been fiddling with during their conversation to thumb the sharp point. The northern saw-whet owl has flown away from the eastern bluebird nest it was raiding, leaving Hannibal with a half-completed sketch. He finishes the last sip of his now cold coffee, mindful of the scattering of grounds collected at the bottom. If he were still in Sacromonte sharing a cave dwelling with the Flores family, Raimunda would read the grounds for him. It's considered bad luck to read them for yourself since your own bias will influence the interpretation. This is a craft she learned from her Turkish father to help loosen coins from tourists pinching fingers. Then they would drink raki and eat thin slices of trevelez ham with bogacha until the sweet liquor infused their muscles. Dancing would overtake their bodies for the most sensual and bewitching flamenco lasting until the sun broke the spell like dissipating mist from the sierra

nevada. Their lips would be stained for the rest of the day from eating pomegranates to ward off impending hangovers.

"Hannibal?" Will asks with a note of urgency to his voice.

"I'm not one to belabor a point. However, I think it would be best to iron out the wrinkles from the previous night before we gather more in this present day."

Will tightly closes his eyes and clenches his free fist. "That's a lot of roundabout driving. The crime scene is closer to my house. I would have to drive past it to get to you and then back again."

"There is a blockade which would place you closer to my home. This way when the officer gatekeeping the ruffians out asks for credentials I will be there if there are any issues."

"Fine," he spits out curtly while reopening his bleary eyes. "I'll drive to your office, and we can carpool to the scene and talk." Talk feels like a tangy copper penny on his tongue.

Hannibal inadvertently snaps the tip of the pencil.

"You would have to add some roundabout driving to arrive at my office. It will be easier to come directly to my home."

Will hesitates. He doesn't want to say that driving to Hannibal's home feels too personal for someone he's only known for about four weeks. And that he wants to keep some boundaries between them because he's still unnerved by how accurately Hannibal described his inner most thoughts when they first met in Jack's office. But his dogs seem to trust Hannibal. If that old adage about dog's sensing evil has any weight to it, then Will has nothing to worry about. Then again.

"I suppose I could do that." He softly bangs his head against the door.

“Excellent. See you soon. Oh, and Will?”

“Yeah?” He asks hesitantly.

“Will you give Luna an extra pat from me?”

“Sure,” Will says. A small smile nestles in the corner of his mouth.

Hannibal disconnects the call before setting about to resharpen his pencil with a newly bladed scalpel.

Will opens the bathroom door to an awaiting audience; he catches Buster mid-piss on the hallway floor with Winston standing beside him whining. Ellie peaks around the corner before cautiously trotting forward. She lowers her head to lap at the urine.

“No!” Will lunges forward to bat her away with too sure of a step which lands in the puddle.

“Motherfucker,” he says under his breath.

The dogs scatter back to the living room while Will rinses his foot in the bathroom sink. He can hear one of the dogs scratching at the front door to be let out. Eight dogs are proving to be quite the commitment. He would consider adopting a few out if they weren’t so old with the accompanying health issues from age. And there’s the simple fact that these dogs were dumped, deemed rejects which might make it more difficult to find them suitable homes.

Will puts on socks found laying on the bathroom floor, not even bothering to dry his foot off. He tears off a few sheets of paper towels to wipe up the piddle puddle, thankful that

it was Buster and not Jack or Max's half a gallon of piss. He sprays some lysol on the floor and considers it clean.

He goes to the living room and the dogs crowd around him, stepping on his toes and each other's paws. There're grumbles and yelps and a snap or two. Will whistles once for everyone's attention. Ears perk up, heads tilt and a few sit down. Will nods self-satisfiedly to himself as he lets the brood outside.

With everyone out of his way, he finally addresses the fallen over coat rack, righting it and collecting his coat from the floor. His pockets are damp but clean of crumbs. He checks the front pocket for his glasses. There is a hairline crack in the right lens from one of the dog's heavy disregarding paws. Will puts the glasses on to assess the damage. The crack is low enough to ignore for now, only splintering his view if he looks a certain way. They'll have to do.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal drive to the latest crime scene together. Will gets an unexpected phone call which inadvertently affects the fate of Miriam Lass.

Chapter Notes

This is a looooonnngg chapter...

cw/tw for mention of a dead parent, graphic description of a body at a crime scene, ill/dying dog (sorry about this one), kidnapping, non-consensual drug use and amputation (not too graphic but nonetheless)

tagalog- balinguyngoy = nose bleed from thinking too hard

italian- riflettere = reflect
nipote = nephew
giorni = days
accettabile= acceptable
pagherei per sapere a casa pensi = penny for your thoughts
scemo = fool

Chapter 12

Will hurries through the rest of his usual routine of getting ready for work. Feed the dogs, hygiene, get dressed, run the dogs outside, give them snacks and water. Not wanting to watch Hannibal grimace the entire ride, he skips the aftershave. He's accumulated a sweaty brow and hunger pangs once all is said and done.

He speeds most of the way to Hannibal's house, special id badge waiting in the dog hair lined cup holder in case he gets pulled over. He doesn't allow himself to think, not this time. Instead, he remembers mud sucking the soles of his bare feet along the wet path to the creek behind the rust corroded trailer he briefly lived in as a kid, one of many. He remembers the rustling of feathers as great blue herons took flight from the edges of the water. He

remembers wriggling his watermelon sticky fingers in the velvet water as tadpoles veered away from the intrusion. It was always calm before it wasn't. Will makes it to Hannibal's house nearly fifteen minutes early. With glasses retrieved from his pocket and worn like armor on his face, he reaches for his personal phone to let Hannibal know he's arrived. The front door opens as he's getting ready to send the call. Hannibal exits the house balancing a reusable coffee cup carrier as he locks up. He looks to Will and motions with his head to the Bentley. Will frowns, mumbling *smug bastard* under his breath as he gets out of his well-worn station wagon.

Will climbs into Hannibal's car. A seat warmer greets him.

"Good morning, Will." Hannibal hands Will a steel thermos of hot coffee. "I trust you slept well?"

"A guy like me, with no problems to speak of? You know I did." He takes a sip of the perfectly bitter black coffee to warm the ice coiled in his belly. His empty stomach gurgles its rejection of the acid liquid.

"There are muffins in the console, please help yourself."

It feels like they're going on a picnic not driving to a crime scene where the victim was made into a candy apple.

Hannibal glances over at Will and notices the damaged glasses.

"What happened to your glasses?"

"One of my beloved strays stepped on them but it's fine." Will almost admits that he doesn't really need them to see, he just likes wearing them for security.

Will eats his muffin with an abundance of caution, trying to keep the crumbs corralled to his lap. He cherishes this moment of stilled silence between them. It's comfortable with

Hannibal. No desire to fill the air with nonsense rambles. Just existing beside one another. But he knows this time is limited. Hannibal will want to talk about last night. He's only letting Will get comfortable first. The seat warmer, the coffee, the food, all designed to pamper him enough to let his guard down.

Will's work phone rings. Hannibal sighs as he shuts off Bach. Will stares at the screen with the location of New Orleans, Louisiana, and an unknown number. He swiftly declines the call.

"Ignoring Jack this morning?" Hannibal asks.

"It wasn't Jack. I don't know who it was. Probably a telemarketer."

Hannibal takes a quick inhale to seize the moment for clearing up the previous night's misunderstanding when the phone rings again.

Will grumbles as he grabs for his phone again. It's the same LA number but still lacking the id for the caller's name. Will declines the call with an unsteady hand.

"Very persistent for a telemarketer. I once had the displeasure of a census taker," the phone rings shrilly, cutting Hannibal off. He glares in Will's direction.

Will doesn't even check this time before denying the call. "I'm sorry Hannibal. What were you saying?" Will's eyes are full of worry while he forces a small smile.

"I was saying," the phone rings again, seemingly louder than the last, demanding to be heard. "This is going to be a tedious drive if you don't sort that caller out soon."

Will nods as he digs back into his pocket for his phone, sending those collected crumbs to scatter onto the rubber floor mat. He answers and speaks first without letting the other caller get a word in. "This is a private number, which I don't give out. Who are you and how did you get this number?"

“Will? Will Graham? My name is Diwa Wyatt, but you can call me Birdie. I’ve been helping your father out these last few years. And I’m sorry but he passed away last night. We got to talking before he passed, and he wants, wanted, shoot it’s still so strange that he’s gone, he wants you at the funeral, to be a pall bearer. I found your number on the internet. On a blog I think it is?” Her voice has the kind of sweetness that lulls you into a comfort where you’d agree to almost anything. The opposite kind of voice Will imagines his mother would have.

“Are you there, cher?” Her tone is evenly measured and slow. Will closes his eyes and leans his head against the window, the sound of the road against the turning tires vibrates deep within his skull.

“Yeah, I’m here Diwa.”

“Look, I know things were left sore between y’all but he was proud of you. And I’m sure you’re familiar with Matthew 5:4, *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*. It will be comforting for your soul to say goodbye to him.”

Will can feel Hannibal stealing glances from the road to scan his face so he tries to control the anger blistering under his skin and reddening his cheeks.

“I’ve got too many work obligations to ignore for two days so that I can make an appearance at my father’s funeral.”

“Well, I’ve read all about your job and it seems to me like a couple days off could do you some good. Give you some stable ground to stand on.”

Will’s eyes spring open as his face contorts into a mask of disgust. “What exactly have you been reading Ms. Wyatt?”

“That umm, oh what’s it called? Gimme a second, I’m going to have a balinguyngoy from thinking so hard. Tittle crime? Prattle crime?”

“Tattle crime,” Will says.

Diwa snaps her fingers. “That’s the one.”

“Freddy Lounds is a social pariah that shouldn’t be taken seriously.”

“I think he’s brave enough to let the public know details that *they* don’t want us to know. Did you read the expose he wrote about you?”

“No, I didn’t.” Not wanting this conversation to go on any longer, Will concedes. “What time is the funeral?”

“The viewing is tonight at six. Maybe you,”

Will snaps into her sentence. “No. I won’t be at the viewing. I can be there to carry the casket but nothing else. No viewing, no reception.”

Hannibal impatiently taps his fingers along the steering wheel.

“Okay, okay, cher. I can tell I stepped on your tail a little there. The funeral starts at eleven tomorrow, but it would be great if,”

Will doesn’t want to hear what Diwa thinks is great. He disconnects the call. Hannibal bites the inside of his cheek with his sharp molar to keep from speaking first. He tongues at the oozing blood from the tender wound.

Will continues to gaze out the window, testing Hannibal’s resolve. He glances at the map navigation. They’re close now. He better get this over with.

“My father died. Last night apparently.” Will tries not to think about what he was doing last night when his father died.

“Are condolences in order?”

“Not for me. We lost contact some years ago. Haven’t spoken, I mean. He still sent me a Christmas card and gift every year.”

“Was one of his last requests to have you at the funeral?”

Will sighs. “I suppose.”

“Are you going to attend?”

“I feel a sense of familial obligation to go.”

“I mean no offense, but do you even own a suit?”

Will lets a harsh laugh loose. “Yes, I own a suit. Just one black wool suit which will probably give me a heat stroke.”

Will’s thoughts start to spiral as he thinks about everything he needs to get done to make it there in time. Plane tickets, hotel room, packing. Maybe try to find a new suit? Who’s going to watch the dogs? He’s going to have to rent a car too. Unless he can figure out how to download and use a ride share app. Jack isn’t going to be happy. Maybe he can work on the daisy and candy case while he’s there. He's going to have to cut this consultation short if he’s going to get anything done in time.

Will realizes he's been holding his breath. He inhales the intoxicating sandalwood and eucalyptus aroma that fills Hannibal's car slowly and deeply as Hannibal pulls the car over to the slim shoulder of the tree lined road.

"You're feeling overwhelmed." He shifts in his seat to face Will.

Will swallows dryly knowing that speaking will be difficult he nods his head instead.

"Let me help you unburden. We will go to the crime scene to appease Jack. I'll give him your approval letter and then tell him about your unfortunate family event. While you analyze the tableau I will book the plane tickets, hotel and rental car. Ona's son, Lukas is always available for extra tasks, he will take excellent care of your dogs."

A quick flare of jealousy ignites in Will's chest. "Who are Ona and Lukas?"

"Ona manages my household, cleaning and errand running. Lukas is her very responsible son who once assisted me with a rodent issue."

"Are you not available to watch over my dogs?"

"No, Will, I am not since I will be coming with you."

Will shakes his head. "No. Don't. That won't be necessary. I can handle this on my own."

"I have no doubts about that. However, Jack may beg to differ. So why not have it seem like it was your choice to have me accompany you as opposed to Jack commanding it? It would also make you look more accountable for your mental health."

And just like that, the weight lifts from Will's tight chest. "Yeah, okay." This time his smile is a bit more believable. Will shifts in his seat to reach for his wallet in order to

give Hannibal his credit card. A firm hand on his shoulder stills him.

"Let's not worry about that now. The only question I have is, did you leave the spare key atop the door frame?"

"Yes?" Will furrows his brow.

"Excellent. Take your time with Jack. I will tend to the dogs and the other tasks. Text me when you are ready to be picked up." Hannibal slowly removes his hand from Will while keeping steady eye contact.

He puts the car back into gear and merges onto the road. A soothing Bach nocturne plays at a quiet volume.

They arrive shortly at the scene. Hannibal lets Will have a moment before they get out of the car to cautiously approach a pacing Jack Crawford. They pass Price and Zeller talking to two other officers.

"She's this fiery little redhead. I mean a real knockout, dressed, well I don't know much about fashion, but you can tell she does. And get this, she was absolutely fascinated with my job. Not squeamish at all. Wanted details like she was getting off on it. She wants to meet up again tonight." Zeller leans into the huddle to drop his voice. "She even felt me up under the table a little."

"About fucking time," Jack says while glaring at Will. "It's in here."

Will follows Jack with Hannibal trailing behind them both. He angles himself in the doorway to better watch Will's expression when he sees the tableau.

"Oh my God," Will whispers as his eyes widen to gulp in the scene.

The sun is rising, shining through the lead warped window of the barn. Dust motes lazily rise and fall in the heat of the sunlight. Beams of pale-yellow light reflect on the red dipped body arranged on a heavy wooden table piled high with crumpled single serve potato chip packages and crushed plastic soda bottles. Jack was right, the pictures aren't enough. And he was right to be concerned with their arrival, another hour under this sun and the coating would've melted. Will takes a deep breath, lungs filling with candy apple sweetened air. Will looks to the far wall to see dancing red hues playing in the light and shadow. He takes a step closer. The shell is starting to crack, like that candy coating you can get on your sundae, tiny drips bead down the body. The man's eyes are gone. Dark chocolate buttons have replaced them.

I took your eyes from you. Since you don't see. I replaced them with something more palatable. In fact, I made you more palatable. I elevated you from the snail that I crush under my shoe to edible art.

"He shaved him. And castrated him," Will says while anxiously looking around at the techs still slowly tending to their tasks.

"Alright, clear the scene, give the man some space." Jack ushers everyone out and casts a questioning glance at Hannibal.

Hannibal leaves last, watching Will for as long as he can. He exits just as Jack does, walking alongside him.

"Might I have a few moments of your time, Jack?" Hannibal asks, while steering them toward his car.

"Sure," Jack says.

They reach the car. Hannibal pops the trunk with his key fob to retrieve his briefcase. He opens it up to hand Jack the signed approval assessment for Will Graham.

Jack smirks. "So, he's sane."

“More or less. His father passed away just last night and he’s expected at the service. He would need about two days, maybe three to attend. He’s even asked me to accompany him to work through any repressed issues that may bubble to the surface while being back home.”

Jack frowns. “Why are you telling me this? If he’s so stable, why does he need a chaperone to hold his hand to see his dead dad?”

Hannibal pivots away from Jack’s rude comment to replace his briefcase and closes the trunk. “Will decided it would be easier to have me there to talk to as opposed to calling or texting. Especially since he plans on working on these last two cases while he’s there.”

Jack folds his arms across his broad chest, but his shoulders lose some of their tension.

“Three cases you mean.”

“Yes, three cases, my mistake. Quite a caseload.”

“Whatever it is you’re implying, you’d better just be blunt.”

“For the average agent three cases, pardon, it’s actually four, isn’t it? You have Will consulting on the Ripper case as well?” Hannibal pauses for Jack to respond; however, he only narrows his eyes at Hannibal. “Four cases, with the possibility of new ones being added with teaching duties, as well as balancing his personal life, would exhaust someone to burnout. But not Will.”

Crawford unfolds his arms to slide his hands in his pockets, he shifts his weight from foot to foot. “You know, he said something very similar this morning, not as long winded, but same context. Get to the point doctor. You want me to approve this little field trip?”

“This little field trip is the only aspect of Will’s life that he can gain control over which will benefit you.”

Jack nods. “Yeah, yeah. Something like the domino effect. Start small to gain the confidence and momentum to knock down other tasks. But if Graham isn’t the average agent who’s susceptible to burnout why does any of this matter?”

“Karoshi.”

“Next time I get stuck on the crossword I’ll call you.” Jack turns slightly to check on the barn. Mostly to make sure Will is still in there and not listening to this conversation. The sun highlights the silver strands hiding in his hair as he turns back to Hannibal.

“The literal translation from Japanese is overwork death. Will would keep pushing himself beyond exhaustion to sickness or an early grave.”

“Idle minds and hands are the devil’s playground.” Jack grins, showcasing the charming gap between his front teeth.

Hannibal takes a step closer to Jack. “You’re his friend and yet you don’t trust him?”

“Friend? No. I hold the reins and direct him. And trust is earned. You can help him achieve that.” Jack pokes a finger into Hannibal’s chest for emphasis.

“Will is your workhorse.” Disappointment fizzles in Hannibal’s nose.

“More or less. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have lives to save.” Jack turns from Hannibal without delay.

“Jack?”

He pauses walking.

"We have your approval then?"

Even turned away the sigh is audible. "Yeah. Let him take care of that so he can refocus on what matters." Jack continues walking to Zeller and Price who are commanding a small huddle of other techs and agents. Hannibal gets into his car and starts the autumnal scenic drive to Will's house.

Meanwhile, Will steps closer to the body. The man's mouth is open wide, jaw dislocated, tongue removed, and filled with cigarette butts and ashes. Neat circles have been sliced from his cheeks.

Braised beef cheeks in a red wine reduction. So tender, they'll melt in your mouth!

Will continues circling the body, filing away details for his report to Jack. There's a puncture wound in the external carotid artery.

I bled you like every whining pig deserves and collected it to mix with the sugar coating that will encase your body.

"Graham?" Jack frowns. He's glad the techs are gone. Will's demeanor has shifted, even the tone of his voice is different.

I boiled you alive. Slowly raising the temperature like a lobster in a pot. Only you couldn't scream because the drugs I injected you with have paralyzed your muscles. It's a graceless death.

"Graham." Jack stands directly behind Will and places a hand on his tense shoulder.

Will turns to face Jack, too close. "What do you think he did with the testicles?"

Jack sighs. "You tell me."

"He ate them." Will smirks.

Jack sucks his teeth and nods. "So now that brings our cannibal tally to two. Seems kinda statistically improbable." Jack steps around Will to look over the body. "I'll make sure the tox screen includes ketamine, succinylcholine and cisatracurium."

Panic laces her fingers through Will's chest as he realizes he said those things out loud.

"It's actually three, Jack."

"I'm getting tired of being corrected today. Who else is a cannibal?" He keeps putting distance between himself and Will.

"The Chesapeake Ripper."

"Why are you thinking about the Ripper?"

"Doesn't this feel like the Ripper to you? This case and the daisy case. They have the same malice and theatrical aspects. Missing edible pieces."

Jack scans Will's disheveled appearance, the sweaty brow, unfocused eyes behind cracked glasses. He paces like an animal in a cage.

“Okay, I’ll entertain this theory. Why now? He’s been inactive for,” Jack pauses, “since he took Miriam. Why come back now?”

“She doesn’t amuse him anymore. He found someone else to direct his attentions to.” Will hesitates. “He’s courting them, flowers, candy. I hope you’re prepared.”

Jack narrows his eyes at Will. “Prepared for what?”

“To see Miriam again in whatever form he gifts her to you in.”

Jack huffs and pulls a hand across his chin, an old self soothing habit from when he had a beard. “So, to recap. You think this case and the daisy case are both the Ripper coming out of retirement to send little love notes to someone and that he’s going to leave Miriam somewhere for me to find. Oh, and the abductor is also a cannibal.”

Jack is in front of Will in a few strides, eyes blazing in fiery anger. “Why stop there? Maybe the abductor is the Ripper too? Or maybe there’s a secret organization of cannibals across the US that chat on the dark web.”

“Fear makes you dumb, Jack.”

For one of the few times in his life, Jack Crawford is shocked to silence for a moment that feels like it spans months.

“Get out of my crime scene Graham. Get some sleep, say your goodbyes to your dad and then come back to work with a clear head and theories that are useful.”

Will shakes his head before turning away from Jack. “There’s going to be more gifts. There are four types of love; eros, storge, philia and agape. This is the seduction phase.”

“Stop talking. You sound sick. I think you’re overworking yourself.”

“Are you going to put me down?” Will stops in the doorway but doesn’t turn to face Jack.

“Remember when I advised you to stop talking? You’re not making any sense.”

The truth is, Will is making Jack uncomfortable. But that he can deal with. It’s the fact that Will relishes making people uncomfortable that never sat well with Jack. Especially now that he’s on the receiving end.

“When horses are no longer useful, they’re shot. You’re right. I should go back to my stable to rest before you drive me harder.”

Will leaves the barn and scans the huddles of detectives and techs for Bev. He readies himself when he spots her with some other female detectives. He smiles brightly as he catches her eye.

“Well, well, well. Look who it is.” She crosses her arms and leans to the left.

“Morning, Beverly. Hey, can I ask you a favor?” He doesn’t exactly bat his eyelashes at her, but it’s close enough for two of the women to snicker.

“Sure. I’ll catch up with you gals later.” She walks away from the group, who start to bicker with jealous tones and darting eyes.

“Did you carpool here?” They continue walking towards the haphazardly parked cars.

“No, I had an eye exam, that’s why I’m a little late. Why are you asking?”

“I need a ride.”

“Twenty bucks.” She stops next to her car and holds out her hand.

“Okay.” Will reaches for his wallet but Bev grabs his surprisingly plump bicep to still his movements. She manages to not let her face show this pleasant revelation.

“I was joking, jez, you gotta lighten up. Get in.”

They get in her cluttered car, his hand touches something sticky on the door handle as he closes the door. Articles of discarded clothes line the backseat, a half empty water bottle rolls from under the seat and bumps Will’s shoe. There’s a distinct smell of a half-eaten breakfast sandwich hiding somewhere.

“So, where to?” She starts to reverse down the gravel driveway to get back to the main road.

Will gives her Hannibal’s home address.

“I thought you lived in Wolf Trap?” She enters the address and starts the navigation.

“I do. But my car isn’t. I just need you to take me to my car so I can get home.”

She waits a few beats before plowing on. “Why isn’t your car at your house? Who did you ride with?”

Will looks out the window to buy some time.

"Oh my god. Hannibal. You rode with the suave Doctor Hannibal Lecter. And you went to his house. Is there something going on between you two?" She looks away from the road to wink at Will.

"Why would you ask that?" His tone is airy and annoyed.

"Well, because if it were, say, Dr. Alana Bloom that you've been having conversations with for weeks and then carpooled to a crime scene together after meeting at her house, people would suspect something. I'm just more open minded, not clouded by heteronormativity."

"We're only friends."

Bev laughs a little. "That's how it always starts." She looks at Will again. "Don't worry. I'm not going to out you or anything. It's not my business. I just like you Graham."

"Careful. People may start to talk." They look at each other solemnly before cracking into smirks.

She drops him off at Hannibal's house and waves while driving back to the lab, wanting to get a head start on the trace analysis.

Will gets into his car and sits for several minutes silently before driving home, forgetting to text Hannibal that he won't be needing him to pick him up.

Meanwhile, Hannibal calls his travel agent on the drive to Will's house. He gives her the details with his preferences for flight time, hotel booking and rental car. Next, he calls Ona to let her know that she won't be needed for the next several days as well as to inquire about her son's availability. Then he calls his tailor to allow him ample time to collect options for Will's new suit, guessing at the sizes. It will have to be an off the rack one for now since there isn't enough time for measuring for a custom design. Next time. The Barber of Seville is playing in a few months at the Baltimore Lyric Opera House. Perhaps Will could be convinced to go?

The hounds start their chorus of barks and howls as Hannibal pulls into the grave driveway, gaining in volume as he finds the key atop the door frame and opens the door. They quiet once they smell him. Hannibal gives the living room a once over for accidents with Luna shadowing him along the way. There is one mess. A bloody stool that has the consistency of jelly. He thinks it must be from one of the smaller dogs as he cleans it up. He singles out Harley, Buster and Zoe to assess their behavior. Harley and Buster are easy to find. Which leaves Zoe, the little white dog with the under-bite. He finds her under a pile of blankets. Her breathing is shallow. Nevertheless, she thumps her tail and rolls over to show her belly for rubs once Hannibal uncovers her hiding spot. He leans down to gently stroke her, identifying the sweet heat of her breath as kidney failure. He tsks. Hannibal checks her eyes for yellow tint, her gums for paleness indicating an internal bleed and the turgidity of her skin in case she's retaining water. All seems well enough. His diagnosis is that she's in the early stages of kidney failure, resulting in death in a week to three months pending other health issues. Zoe licks his hand. Hannibal gives her a soothing scratch behind her ear. Then he gets up to go upstairs to rummage through Will's boxes to find the only suit he owns.

Hannibal checks the closet first as Luna settles down across the room from him to watch. Zoe also lumbers into the room to curl up near one of the boxes closest to the door. And there the wool suit hangs in all of its wrinkled and dog hair covered glory.

A pair of black oxfords are sitting underneath the suit while a crisp white shirt hangs behind the blazer. He takes the blazer off the wire hanger to check the size before doing the same for the trousers, texting the measurements to Giuseppe. While his phone is out Hannibal decides to check in with Will.

I'm just about finished caring for your dogs if you are ready to be picked up

Will responds almost immediately.

No need. I left early. On my way back now

The ghost of disappointment crosses Hannibal's fine features. He carefully scoops up Zoe and leaves Will's room with Luna at his heels. He lets the dogs out, paying special attention to Zoe. Once they're back in, he makes a simple omelet for Will with some

repulsive instant coffee, placing both on the table. He cleans up after himself before he leaves the house. He's closing the screen door as Will pulls in.

Will quickly parks and gets out of his car.

"You're not staying?"

"I have some errands to tend to before we leave in the morning, as do you. I will send you the ticket information shortly." He briskly gets in his car, leaving Will baffled with his abruptness. "Oh, and Will. Zoe isn't feeling well. Maybe make her something special for dinner tonight, one of her favorites."

"Sounds like a last meal." Will tries for humor but when Hannibal doesn't join in his face falls.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Kidney failure. She has a week to three months if she keeps eating and drinking, baring other health issues. How is her liver?"

"Her liver? Fine, I guess? I don't fucking know."

The smallest of frowns inches the corners of Hannibal's mouth downward.

Will shifts uncomfortably on his feet. "You say it so nonchalantly, as if she's a shirt that needs to be dry cleaned." His voice is thick with emotion.

"I was a trauma surgeon, Will. One skill that I learned that has proved to be beneficial in all circumstances is not letting empathy overrule logic. My measured reaction may seem cold to you but who would you rather have at your bedside while you lay bleeding; someone

who can take control of the situation in a calculated manner or someone so overcome with feelings that they fail to act within your best interest?"

Hannibal holds Will's gaze gently, wanting nothing more than to get out of the car and hold him, comfort him. But they don't have time for that now. Time always seems to be against them lately. Tears well in Will's blue eyes. He clears his throat and swallows, sniffling once before straightening up. He pats the top of Hannibal's car and turns away from him.

Hannibal drives home first to pack his bags. He reviews the options Anna sent him for the plane tickets, rental car and hotel room and makes his selection. He sends all the details to Will as promised. Will doesn't respond. Hannibal sighs. He packs his car and then drives to Giuseppe's Custom Suit Shopee to pick out a nice linen suit for Will. The shoes he has are adequate. A tie isn't necessary. The white button down that was also in the closet looked clean enough.

The sign reads closed but a dim light emanating from the back warms the glass window. Hannibal knocks to let Giuseppe know he's here before entering. The man has a shotgun under the cash register and doesn't like to be surprised. Hannibal opens the door to enter the shopee. Giuseppe emerges from one of the back rooms once the bells jingle with a genuine look of delight on his wrinkle worn face.

"Doctore!" He exclaims with open arms.

His smile is contagious, and after leaving things so sour with Will it's nice to see someone so enthused to see him. Hannibal beams back at the white mustached man with the wispy white hair. He reaches out for Hannibal's hand to shake and encloses it with both of his fine boned but knuckle swollen hands affectionately.

"Let's go to the back. I have several options I pulled for you and a nice cold grappa to sip on while you riflettere." He escorts Hannibal down the corridor with his arm wrapped around his waist due to their height differences.

Hannibal takes a seat in one of the soft leather chairs placed around a small glass table and sips at the chilled amber aged grappa.

"This is different from the last one you poured for me. More licorice and tobacco undertones." Hannibal takes a slice of plum from the little plate on the table letting the burst of soured sweetness balance out the unique grappa flavors. "Delightful."

Giuseppe shrugs his shoulders. "It's from my nipote. He's got great taste. Someday you must meet him, eh?"

Hannibal nods and raises his glass at Giuseppe in toast. Giuseppe comes to the table to click his glass against Hannibal's.

"Saluti," they say in unison.

Giuseppe swallows the liquor and exhales excitedly. He turns to the rack to show Hannibal his options.

"These are all lightweight weaves. The first is cotton, the second is linen and the third is chambray. I looked up the temperature outlook in New Orleans for the next few giorni and it's going to be gloomy. Less sun but humid. Considering that, no black. But dark grey, navy and charcoal are perfectly accettabile." He brings the dark grey over to Hannibal first.

He runs his hand over the soft cotton of the blazer and then holds it up to the light. Before nodding for the next one, the charcoal linen. Hannibal slides his arm up the pant leg to feel the fabric against his skin, imagining how it would feel rubbing against Will's thigh. Rough. Scratchy. He's too sensitive for this kind of fabric. He shakes his head no. Giuseppe switches out for the navy chambray suit. The weave is beautiful with white and grey threads to both tone down and highlight the navy color, making it sheen in the light. With Will's dark hair and blue eyes, he'll look dashing. Hannibal's glad he packed his similar albeit grey chambray suit. They'll coordinate nicely.

"This is magnificent, Giuseppe, truly. Thank you."

Giuseppe smiles proudly and takes a seat at the small table. He takes a plum slice from the plate and pops it into his mouth.

"I hope it fits well." He side-eyes Hannibal.

"I hope so too. But it will have to do for the time being."

"Am I going to meet him, your amante?" Giuseppe wiggles his eyebrows suggestively at Hannibal.

"What makes you think he's my lover?"

Giuseppe points to his heart and then his head, as if that's all that's needed to convey his meaning.

Hannibal takes another sip of the grappa, now slightly warmer and more pungent with the tobacco taste. He imagines bringing Will here for a fitting before jetting off to a villa in Tuscany to lounge outside in the hazy yellow sun, eating elderberries and prosciutto. Holding hands. Removing each other's clothing to swim naked in their private pool. Toweling each other off. Among other things.

Hannibal grins which makes Giuseppe laugh heartily.

"Someday. Perhaps soon." Hannibal stays seated, lingering in the comfort of the tailor. He doesn't want to leave yet. Because that would mean he would have to put his next plan in motion. And he's grown so fond of Miriam. Taking her arm is going to be painful. Empathy is such an overrated emotion. She was just getting acquainted with the piano forte too.

"Pagherei per sapere a cosa pensi?"

Hannibal finishes his drink and quickly eats another slice of plum.

“Tell me a story about your youth. Maybe a time you got yourself into trouble.” The leather crinkles as Hannibal leans back in his seat and crosses his legs at the ankles.

“Have I ever told you about the time I got my wife confused with her cousin and was chased around the farm with a meat cleaver by her father?”

Hannibal shakes his head no. The front doorbell jingles unexpectedly.

Giuseppe frowns. “Another time.” The old man gets up from the seat with clicking joints.

But Hannibal stills him and goes to check the front of the store.

“Ahhh, Doctore! This is why Giuseppe is late. That scemo would be late to his own funeral.” Her hands flap around her like wild doves in the air.

Giuseppe sneaks around Hannibal to go to his wife. Hannibal watches with rapt attention as they kiss like they’re still young lovers. Giuseppe turns to Hannibal.

“I’ll bill your account.”

“Grazie,” Hannibal says as he walks past the couple to leave the quaint store.

“Eh, and Doctore. Enjoy yourself, huh. It’s one in the eye for death!” Giuseppe and his wife chuckle at the sentiment.

Hannibal drives to his house on the bluff. He flashes his headlights once as he pulls into the garage. He gets out of his car and knocks thrice on the door before entering. Miriam sits at the table in the kitchen with her elbow propped on its glossy surface, leaning her head into

her hand. She quietly dozes, her long reddish hair cascading down in loose tendrils. Hannibal dislikes that he won't have time to take her to Maine for a haircut before everything.

He steps conscientiously closer to her, inhaling the lavender vanilla soap he brought her last week. She made dinner for them. Tomato soup with grilled cheese and a simple salad. A playful contrast with the navy gown dotted with shimmering stones and plunging neckline she adorns. A tiny snore escapes her mouth, the sound startles her awake.

"Jack! You're back! I was so worried." She pushes her chair back to envelop Hannibal in a hug.

He's relieved that she keeps her hands on his upper back. She's grown more flirtatious in these last few months and politely denying her is proving to be delicate since Hannibal has no desire to bed this woman. It wouldn't be ethical since he's been drugging her and using psychic driving for three years now. Any feelings she thinks she has for him are merely the need for survival and Stockholm syndrome. Under other circumstances, he would most certainly take her body to celestial realms of orgasmic release. Alas, that is not how things will go for them. He pulls back from her embrace to admire the fit of her gown.

"You haven't worn this since last spring. What's the occasion?" He hates how flat words sound with an American accent.

Miriam takes an offended step back. "You don't remember?"

Hannibal tilts his head. He hurriedly runs through the chambers of his memory palace to locate her room. He sifts through strewn papers on a waxy cherry table with ornately carved legs. This is the anniversary of Jack rescuing her from the Ripper and placing her in protective custody.

"Today marks three years since I found you."

"And three years since Jack Crawford died."

“That’s right. You have a great memory.” Hannibal sits at the table and motions for Miriam to do the same.

They begin to eat the lukewarm food. Miriam curls her lip.

“It was better when it was hot.”

“It’s fine. Best thing I’ve eaten all day.” Hannibal smiles at her. He takes a bite of the oily congealed sandwich. “You used the truffle brie and the mozzarella. Excellent choices.”

He takes a spoonful of the soup into his mouth and nods approvingly. “Balsamic vinegar with maple syrup. A wonderful balance.” The vinegar stings at the freshly bitten sore in his cheek.

“How was work today? Any leads on the Ripper? Was there a moment of silence for the guru?”

“Someone brought in doughnuts and muffins. I saved you one.” Hannibal retrieves a paper towel covered muffin from his coat pocket.

Miriam takes it with a heavy frown on her face. “How much longer is this witness protection going to last? I miss my family and I miss work. I just want to get on with my life.”

Hannibal leans forward to reach out to Miriam, placing a warm hand on her gown covered knee.

“I know. Hey, I’ll make us some tea and put the fireplace on.”

Miriam perks up a little.

"Go get comfortable," he says.

Miriam gets up and goes to her room to change. Hannibal waits until he hears the door close before getting up from the table. He goes to the cabinet above the fridge, the one that's too high for Miriam to reach, to grab the tin stashed in the back. He looks over his shoulder before he opens the lid and selects a slender glass vial from the foam packaging. He takes the bright yellow daisy mug from the drying rack, Miriam's favorite, and breaks the top off the vile, letting the contents drip into the mug. Then he makes their tea.

She's already reclining on the sofa in a thin navy t-shirt and light grey jogger sweats when he brings their mugs out. She takes a long sip and stares into the unlit fireplace. Hannibal puts his mug down to get the fire going. Miriam feels her body soften as the fire glows against her face. She curls her legs up on the sofa and rests her head on the plush arm. Slowly, her eyes close. Hannibal finishes another two chapters before putting his book down to get up from his chair. He goes to Miriam and snaps his fingers against her ear to access her deepness of sleep. She doesn't stir. Hannibal effortlessly lifts her and carries her into her bedroom. He moves her hair from her face to kiss her forehead. With heavy steps he retires to his room. He opens a secret compartment in his closet where some of his secrets lay in wait. He selects a pair of black jeans and a black hoodie with heavy black boots and a black balaclava. He also takes a pair of black latex gloves and a flashlight. He spritzes Jack's cologne onto the clothing. He opens a heavy oak box to retrieve a capped syringe.

Hannibal takes a cooler from the pantry closet to the kitchen to fill it with ice. He opens a drawer for a large freezer zipper bag and places it on top of the ice. Next, he takes everything to the garage, the cooler going into the trunk, next to his bags and Will's new suit, before he changes into the black clothing. Then he walks back into the house and towards Miriam's room.

Hannibal places the flashlight down on the nightstand, set to strobe in Miriam's face. Hannibal slips a free hand into his pocket for the capped syringe to dose Miriam again. She wakes up as soon as the hand clamps over her mouth, kicking lamely under the blankets. Miriam tries to scream and then to bite to no avail. She tries to lift her arms to pry the hand off her, but her heavy muscles refuse to act with the fervor she needs. She inhales the familiar cologne and starts to seize. It's a mild seizure. Then her body goes slack. He lifts her from the bed to carry her to the backseat of his car in the garage. He goes back to her room to take the comforter from her bed. It'll be cold in the cabin, especially in the basement. He covers her body with the blanket before removing the balaclava from his head

which gets placed on the passenger seat. There's no music on this drive, only the audio downloaded from several of Jack Crawford's lectures.

They arrive at the abandoned cabin which has been fashioned into a work house of sorts for Hannibal, odds and ends collected over the years for his murder tableaus are piled neatly in various areas. He moves quickly, getting Miriam out of the car and prepping her for surgery. The removed arm is placed in the plastic zippered bag and into the cooler full of ice. Then he lowers her into one of the dry wells. She won't die. But she certainly won't be comfortable. There is the risk of infection to consider. Hopefully, all will be well when he returns to check on her in a few days. He tosses the blanket into the well.

Since everything goes smoother than Hannibal anticipated, he has time to drive back home to store Miriam's arm in his basement freezer instead of another safe house. He even has time to sleep for a few hours. A personal best for him.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Will meets Lukas. Hannibal and Will make it to the airport without bickering. Will has a nightmare.

Chapter Notes

hello again constant readers! apologies for the delay in posting.

tw/cw for ill dog, dead parent and racist imagery (i would be remiss to not mention the racist roots CCR had considering they were previously called the golliwogs which is a nasty little doll in the style of a minstrel).

Chapter 13

The morning is a whirlwind of clothes flung into open luggage and dogs barking. Will barely manages his morning tasks with sleep deprived heavy muscles and constant yawning that sends tears streaming out from his eyes. If it weren't for Hannibal's omelet, Will would've had nothing to eat for the rest of the day yesterday. He hovers over Zoe, debating whether this trip is worth it if she dies while he is away. A deep blue ache throbs through the entirety of his body at the thought. Even though he's always had at least one dog for the last decade or so, their deaths have never gotten easier for him. The idea that the world can give you something to cherish that becomes such an integral part of your life as you watch it slowly descend into brokenness before disappearing forever seems malicious. What kind of god would allow that?

Will's personal cell phone pings and vibrates on the kitchen counter as he washes out the dog's food bowls. He wipes his hands on the kitchen towel and then his pants before he picks up the phone, pinging and vibrating again against his palm.

Lukas will be arriving shortly to meet you and your collected strays. He will adhere to any instructions you provide him. I can be there in an hour or so to pick you up on

my way to the airport, unless you prefer to drive alone

The next text has a picture of an expensive looking blazer and trousers.

I've taken the liberty of acquiring you an appropriate suit for the weather conditions in Louisiana. It is off the rack so to speak but it should fit well enough

Will doesn't know if he should grimace or smile at the gesture. He decides to not decide now.

Thank you for the suit. I would offer to pay you back but I imagine it's out of my price range

I'll ride with you since I may be a hazard on the road today

Will goes back upstairs to double check his packing, rehanging his wool suit in the closet and is bringing his luggage downstairs when a light knock raps against the front door. Will peeks out the window to get a look at this *Lukas* character. Of course, he's fucking striking, in a god like way. Almost as tall as Hannibal and just about as lean as Hannibal. His long blonde hair is pulled back into a low ponytail. His bright blue eyes are a friendly contrast to the prominent cheekbones. Just like Hannibal.

Unsure if this is just coincidence or an illegitimate child, Will opens the door with more force than necessary. Lukas smiles broadly at Will. The light wash ripped jeans slung low on his hips and the short sleeved white shirt with all the buttons at the top undone to show off his well-defined muscles are not something Hannibal would ever wear.

"Hello, Mr. Graham! I'm Lukas. Sorry to hear about your dad." He waits politely to be asked inside.

Will makes him wait. "Don't be."

His smile loses a few watts of its brightness. His broad shoulders slump a little.

The dogs finally notice that there's a stranger at the door and they rush over, sniffing and barking, edging each other out of the way. Lukas smiles again.

"Ahh, here they are!" He looks over the dogs as Max jumps up and opens the door.

Lukas takes a step back as Max's front paws land in his arms. Harley takes the open-door opportunity to scamper outside.

"No!" Will shouts as he watches Harley tear ass up the grass to the rabbit den he's been terrorizing these last few weeks.

"I'll get him, don't you worry," Lukas says as he lets Max down and jogs to catch up with Harley. Max runs alongside him, already buddies.

"Traitor," Will says under his breath.

He watches Lukas approach Harley, kneeling to let the dog smell him before scratching under his chin, his little traitor back leg thumping wildly against the grass. Then he scoops him up with his bicep bulky arms and walks back to the house. Max tries to nip at Harley's paws just once as Lukas corrects him instantly with a sharp, no.

Will holds the door open to let them inside. The dogs swarm the new stranger, licking his hands and sniffing his clothes. He laughs and gives pets to whoever he can reach. Will crosses his arms and clears his throat. Lukas stops greeting the dogs to look to Will.

"Isn't it a little cold for short sleeves?" Jealousy pitches Will's tone up to bitchy.

“Not when the sun is this warm.” Lukas winks at Will.

Unsure of how to react, Will continues with the instructions.

“Anyway, I make all of their food, which are in these containers.” Will walks to the kitchen to open the fridge, showing Lukas the large containers of dog food. “I also make their treats which I keep in these drawers.” Will opens the two bottom drawers. “They get breakfast, a mid-morning treat after playtime, and dinner, then a snack after last call. Their serving sizes are on the lids. They should go outside every four hours or so. And I like to let them run the yard at least twice a day. Their bowls should be washed after each meal and their water bowls should be washed before bed.”

Lukas nods while making notes on his phone. He looks up once he’s finished to catch Will’s annoyed face. He flips his phone around to show him the notes. Will relaxes a little.

“Just how old are you, Lukas?” Will lets his gaze scrutinize the tan arms and the silver rings that adorn several of his fingers. One of which is a wolf in mid howl. Another looks like a battle axe.

“Twenty-two.”

Will nods, *of course*.

“I should introduce you to them.”

“No need,” Lukas says before correctly naming each dog. “Hannibal may have sent me some info to prep me,” he says shyly.

“What else did Hannibal tell you?”

“Just that little Zoe isn’t feeling well and to give her some extra attention. And to let you know immediately if something happens.”

The last sentence hangs in the air like a carefully balanced blade, threatening to come crashing down to destroy the false assurances Will has told himself about this trip.

“I know this may be, umm, presumptuous of me, but I did pack an overnight bag. I can stay the night here so she’s never alone. I promise I’m a tidy and quiet house-guest.”

For the first time since Lukas has arrived, Will smiles at him. He sighs with sinking relief, transforming that anxious blade suspended above them into gently falling feathers.

“That is a great idea. Thank you. I’m sorry if I was rude early, I’ve just got a lot going on right now.”

Lukas nods and claps a compassionate hand on Will’s shoulder.

“I’ll go get my things.” He turns to leave when Will stops him.

“Wait. How much do I owe you?” Will retrieves his wallet from his back pocket while mentally tallying the average wage by hour then multiplied by day. He isn’t sure he has enough cash. Is it customary to tip in these situations? Especially if said person may be cleaning up bloody dog shit. Lost in his thoughts, Will finally looks up at Lukas.

“It’s already been taken care of.” He shrugs his shoulders, not a care in the world.

“How about something extra for pizza or something? I don’t have much in the fridge.” Will looks over his shoulder to better mentally inventory his fridge and pantry contents.

Lukas gives Will a toothy smile, showing off his slightly crowded bite. Will puts his wallet away.

“Already taken care of,” Will says.

“I stopped at the grocery store on the way. I like to cook. A little wine, a little music. Hopefully your dogs don’t mind singing.”

Will stares blankly at Lukas, in awe at how easy going his demeanor is. How nice life must be for him to be able to look on the bright side of things. Will is also willing to bet that this kid doesn’t have nightmares that cling to his eyes like sticky film distorting reality.

“Hannibal really thought of everything,” Will says.

“He’s good at helping people de-stress, if they’re willing to accept his help.” Lukas points knowingly at Will before leaving the house to gather his things from his car. A few of the dogs trickle out behind him and follow him to his car.

The oddity of the sentence strikes Will as the door slams closed. He furrows his brow in consideration. He doesn’t know what to do with himself while he waits for Hannibal. All of his packing is done and ready, the dogs are situated, and Lukas seems capable enough to care for them. Will walks over to the living room window to watch Lukas grab his things, he gets distracted and starts playing with the dogs. He throws the old tennis ball Jack had in his mouth as he followed Lukas outside. Not to be out done Ellie grabs a stick for Lukas to throw, her long ears flopping behind her as she runs after it. Will hopes the ball is covered in foamy slobber. And that the stick gives him a splinter.

Will decides to sit down on the couch. He looks around his disheveled home, chastising himself for not moving in properly yet. Maybe when he gets back, he’ll settle in more. Winston meanders over to rest his head on Will’s lap, silently asking for pets. Will obliges and looks to Zoe who’s curled up on the other side of the couch. He pats his thigh for her to come next to him. She perks up and cuddles alongside his leg with a little grumble. Will rubs her side, wondering if her ribs were always this prominent. He starts to wonder about other things that may have passed his notice and the implications. Is he bad at caring for living things? Is he a bad person? Why do the dogs trust him so much when all he thinks about is murder? He clenches his jaw as he thinks about Zeller and how he tried to humiliate him in the lab. He’s lost count of the various ways he’s killed Brian in his thoughts. Maybe there’s time to indulge in another fantasy. Will’s hand stills from petting Winston as blood pools to

his core. Voices outside derail his train of thought. He tries to turn to look out the window without disturbing the dogs too much. Which fails. Zoe ends up rolling under Will's thigh as he knocks into Winston's nose with his knee. Winston sneezes onto Will's pants before he walks away to messily drink some water. Will gets up to brush his pants, then he helps Zoe from the couch crevice she's stuck mid-roll in and puts her on the floor. She shakes herself and walks over to a dog bed to lay down, choosing the largest one from the pile.

Will walks over to the door, debating whether to go outside to interrupt their rather friendly conversation. He watches how Lukas leans into Hannibal's personal space, beaming smile, crossing his arms to subtly flex his hard-earned muscles. Then he leans away, uncrossing his arms to put his hands in his pockets which pulls his already low jeans even dangerously lower, revealing a thick slab of tan skin on his flat abdomen and jutting hipbones. Will watches Hannibal's gaze but trying to discern where he's looking from this distance is proving to be difficult. Will closes his eyes to better feel their interaction. Playful purple waves of interest and lust idle from Lukas, probing Hannibal's space for reaction. Hannibal isn't uninterested, he mildly entertains Lukas's attentions. But his thoughts wander elsewhere. Bored.

Why? Will thinks as he reopens his eyes.

Luna nudges her way between Hannibal and Lukas and sits so that Hannibal's hand rests on her head. They laugh at her possessiveness and Lukas tries to alleviate the tension by petting her. Luna emits a low growl, mostly from her throat as to not bare her teeth. Will opens the door to hurry outside before things turn bloody and he loses the babysitter.

"Ahhh, there he is!" Lukas exclaims shortly after the door slams closed, announcing Will's approach.

Hannibal turns away from Lukas to watch Will walk toward them.

Jack hurries to Will and nudges the wet ball against his palm. Ellie circles behind Will and rams the stick into the hollow of his knee pitching Will's body forward. Both Hannibal and Lukas reach forward to assist him.

"I'm fine," Will says harsher than he would have liked.

“I was asking Hannibal if there were any good take away places around here,” Lukas says.

“Didn’t you say you like to cook? A little wine, a little music. Horrible singing,” Will says.

Lukas turns a deep red, flushing up his neck to his ears having been caught in his lie. He swallows and tries to laugh his shame away. “It’s always good to have a backup plan, in case I set fire to your kitchen.”

Will stares blankly at Lukas.

He inhales. “I wouldn’t. I mean, I, umm,” he sighs with eyes darting between Hannibal and Will, searching for a lifeline.

“There isn’t,” Will says.

“What?” Lukas asks.

“There isn’t anything good out here,” Will says.

“Then why did you move here?” Lukas smiles and looks to Hannibal for help with the rude dog man.

The tiniest of smirks hides in the corners of Hannibal’s mouth as he does nothing to remedy the tone of the conversation.

“That’s exactly why I moved out here,” Will says.

“Huh, interesting,” Lukas says as he turns away from Will, shooting Hannibal a quick glance before closing the trunk of his car.

He turns back around with the sunlight highlighting strands of his blonde hair, spinning them into gold. “Well, I should go and get settled. Anything I should know? Rooms off limits, drawers that should remain closed?” He nudges an elbow in Will’s direction with a grin directed at Hannibal.

“I imagine nothing is off limits for you,” Will says.

Lukas deflates into a frown. He shrugs his shoulders and makes his way between Hannibal and Will with his things. Luna follows Lukas and nips at his shoulder bag as he climbs the stairs. He loses his footing for a tense moment but regains himself. He goes inside the house, leaving Luna outside on the porch to watch him through the screen door.

“Your dogs are in capable hands, Will,” Hannibal says.

“Sure, they are,” Will retorts.

“Do you not trust my judgement?”

Will huffs. “Maybe I don’t trust how you came to that conclusion.”

Will can’t bring himself to look at Hannibal. He settles on looking over Hannibal’s shoulder to stare at the trees.

“I should go get my bags and say bye to the dogs.” Will walks away from Hannibal. He whistles once for the dogs to follow him inside.

Hannibal stands baffled for a moment before he goes to pop the trunk for Will’s things.

Will enters his house and sees Lukas sprawled out on the couch with Zoe, his head tilted back with closed eyes as he absentmindedly twirls chunks of his hair gathered in the ponytail. His other hand lightly rests on Zoe. His face is relaxed, bemused even. His legs are spread wide, careless, without regard for his shirt riding up to expose his vulnerable stomach. His kicked off white tennis sneakers with the laces still tied lay next to his half-opened bags with clothing spilling out onto the floor. The frayed edges of his jean's hems dangle against his dingy white socks. Will looks to the kitchen to see a few cooler bags huddle in front of the fridge. He jumps a little when he notices Will staring at him.

"Ohh, Mr. Graham!" He exclaims while looking at the mess he's made. "I thought I'd take a break from unpacking to get more acquainted with Zoe."

"It's fine. I'm just going to grab my things and head out." Will doesn't make eye contact with Lukas.

He goes to each dog to give them individual attention, saving Zoe for last. He kneels in front of the couch to be level with her little face. She licks his nose bringing hot tears to his eyes. Will leans into her neck to deeply inhale her fading oatmeal shampoo and distinct dog scent. He brings his hands up to pull her closer into his body, wishing that they could meld together so they'd never be without one another. Lukas sits up to give Will space since his arm is now rubbing the outside of Lukas's thick thigh. Will knows he's making Lukas uncomfortable, but he doesn't care, he wants him to squirm away from his presence.

He whispers in her ear. "Wait for me. Don't leave while I'm away, please. You're such a good girl. Papa loves you."

Hannibal pauses in the doorway, perplexed with the scene in front of him. The angle adds an erotic tinge to an otherwise ordinary act. Will affectionately bidding goodbye to his ill dog looks like he's on his knees to perform fellatio on a writhing Lukas. Lukas stands up immediately with his mouth agape, shaking his head no at Hannibal. He taps Will on the shoulder to get his attention. Will kisses under Zoe's ear and takes a shaky deep breath. He stands up slowly with weakened knees, bringing the back of his hand up to swipe away the fallen tears.

It is in this moment that Hannibal knows he would kill for Will. He would maim anyone that would dare to hurt him. The world can be a cruel place. But Hannibal knows a thing or two about being cruel, having learned in his youth that violence can be a useful tool if wielded correctly. The emotional mix of shared sorrow from seeing Will's tears to the animalistic urge to protect fading into arousal from seeing Will on his knees is certainly new for the usually stoically controlled Hannibal. He swallows thickly to compose himself before speaking.

"I came back inside to see if you needed assistance with your bags." Hannibal manages to say gruffly.

Will is momentarily taken aback by Hannibal's demeanor. He sniffles and clears his throat.

"They're by the front door." Will strides quickly past Lukas to grab his bags.

Hannibal reaches for the handle of the heaviest looking bag at the same time as Will. His cool hand lands on top of Will's feverish hand. Hannibal lets his touch linger, looking into Will's breathtaking blue eyes. Their heads lean into each other's space, intimate and close. Will opens his mouth to say something, anything. But nothing feels right. Hannibal inches closer to Will, eyes flicking down to his lips then back up to his eyes. Everything is still, as if time itself is holding its breath under the tension. Lukas drops his phone, shattering the delicate moment. Hannibal removes his hand from Will and straightens up, glaring at Lukas.

"Sorry, clumsy fingers." He picks up his phone with a fake grimace on his face.

Hannibal's phone chirps. Will gathers his things with tingling fingers. He tries to crane his neck to look at Hannibal's phone screen.

"We should get going. That was a reminder I set to leave for the airport."

"Well, safe travels! And I'll keep you updated, Mr. Graham. Oh, and dinner next Tuesday, Hannibal?" Lukas asks.

Anger coils tightly in Will’s stomach. He lets his gaze fixate on the scratched wooden floorboards.

“I’ll have to check my schedule, but I’ll let you know. Thank you for being available on such short notice.”

Will can feel the suggestive smirk on Lukas’s face like spit on his cheek.

“I can be available for you anytime, Hannibal.”

Will can’t keep standing between their flirtation any longer. He brushes past Hannibal to leave his house, walking briskly to the open trunk, silently berating himself for being angry with the kid for the same bullshit he pulls on occasion. Hell, he's even done it the first few times in Hannibal's office, flaunting himself around whenever topics tiptoed into personal areas. He would pace the room and then look out the window with his back to Hannibal or he would lean against things like an aloof cat draping himself casually upon things that didn't belong to him. He's done it to Beverly to have at least one person in the lab trust him. It's easier to manipulate people when they think you're flirting with them. But it's easy. And boring. So, Will tries to refrain from such activities unless truly needed.

His things are stored and the trunk is closed by the time Hannibal comes outside. Will settles into the passenger seat, rolling his shoulders to relax the twitchy muscles. Hannibal slips into the car and sits quietly for a moment.

“Will, I,” Hannibal starts to say but Will interrupts him.

“Can we just,” he pauses, “I don’t want to talk right now. I just want quiet for a little bit.” Will sighs and looks out the window.

Hannibal purses his lips and begins the drive to the Dulles International Airport. He isn’t sure if the half hour drive is a boon or a bane. Perhaps Will could be persuaded to converse during the three-hour plane ride? Will watches with bated breath as Hannibal drifts his hand

over to turn on some music. He relaxes once Hannibal's hand is back to firmly gripping the steering wheel.

"I put a spell on you, because you're mine." John Fogerty taunts lowly through the speakers.

Will's spirit revives a little, not dissimilar to Luna.

"I didn't think someone like you would listen to CCR," Will says.

"I don't. But Luna seemed to enjoy them so I assumed you would as well."

Hannibal lets the music shuffle through CCR's various albums, enjoying the sight of Will tapping along on his knee with agile fingers. The calmed state lasts while Hannibal parks the car through them walking into the airport. It is here, where Will starts to fidget again. His eyes narrow against the searing lights that seem to hiss against his skin. Being in such crowded places overwhelms Will. There are so many smells and snippets of conversations that shoulder out his own thoughts. He's never been fond of airports or airplanes and Will dreads the inevitable day when Jack requests his presence at a crime scene in another state. Most likely it will be this Minnesota abductor case, if he ever gets sloppy and leaves a body. Will would prefer to travel by train or car or even boat. There's a trapped feeling to planes.

Hannibal on the other hand, isn't fond of commercial flights, especially cattle class. Taking in the same recycled air from mouth breathers for hours is not worth the savings, in his opinion. Not to mention the grey gristle they pass off for food. Luckily this is a short flight that doesn't require him to suffer down a meal. But he knew that Will would already be shocked by the new suit, and he didn't want to overwhelm him with first class seats. Not yet at least. There will be time for that later.

Will fidgets in his seat while waiting for the boarding announcement. The overhead lights have forced his eyes to slits.

"Have you got any aspirin?" He asks Hannibal.

“Would you prefer something stronger?” Hannibal raises his brows in question.

“Well, you are a doctor. Maybe something that will help me sleep. I hate planes and I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Hannibal reaches into his pocket and shakes out one long pill for Will, who eagerly dry swallows it.

“How long has the lack of sleep been persisting for?”

Will shrugs his shoulders. “Oh, I’m not sure. Maybe a week and a half, almost two.”

“Are you having nightmares?”

Will nods. “But, ahh, lately it feels like I’m still asleep when I wake up or that I’m awake when I think I’m sleeping.”

“That sounds to me like you’re dangerously approaching exhaustion.”

Will crosses his arms in front of his chest and slides down a little in his seat.

“Thank you again for the suit. It’s probably the most expensive thing that I own. And planning all of this on such short notice. You really went out of your way to help me. Hopefully someday I can repay you.”

“My terms of repayment are unconventional.”

“Considering your therapy methods, I’m not surprised.”

“Have dinner with me,” Hannibal says.

Will reaches a hand up to ruffle the back of his head. “I guess I could get some mileage out of this suit.”

“Not at a restaurant, at my home, no need to dress up.”

Will pales a little. “I’m not a good house-guest.”

Hannibal doesn’t retreat. “That’s what makes you so interesting.”

“Would this be in addition to the extra therapy session I owe you or in place of?”

Hannibal looks away briefly. “Always so practical,” he says.

“It’s a necessity for work horses like me.”

Hannibal tsks. “You’re not a work horse, Will.”

“What about a bloodhound, or a mongoose, or what, ahh, what else do they call me,” Will pauses. “Zeller said I was a snake that slithered his way into the chicken coop and Bev told me that Jack once referred to me as a fragile little teacup, only reserved for special occasions. Dare I ask what your notes label me as? Maybe something not even sentient, like a mirror, only existing to reflect others. I can only guess how Lounds portrayed me in that article. Probably something trite like a killer or a psychopath.”

“You defy labels, Will. You're just like me in that sense.”

Will smiles at the flattery but deflects by saying, “What will you make me for dinner if I join you?”

Hannibal stares deeply into Will's eyes, sending his core into delicious spasm. The airport dulls to a quiet hum, meaningless static. Faces blur into objects. He can feel himself being pulled in by those strange warm maroon eyes, comforting like cinnamon in hot tea. Will swallows dryly, wondering if the pill is affecting him this soon. Hannibal watches his gaze lose focus.

“Never ask what's for dinner, it will ruin the surprise. Are you feeling alright?” Hannibal reaches his hands up to Will's face to pull him closer, moving one hand up to rest the back of his hand against the hot skin of his forehead while the other rests against his cheek.

Will closes his eyes to retreat from the intimacy, breath catching in his tight throat. “I'm fine. I think that whatever you gave me is starting to work.”

Hannibal removes his hands from Will, inhaling the air clouding around him as he does. Arousal. The distinct acrid hormone smell of arousal. Will reopens his eyes once the announcement to board their flight is made. He keeps his eye-line away from Hannibal as they gather their things to board their flight. Will manages to walk with unsteady ankles without the attendants noticing. Hannibal takes care of storing their luggage so that Will can sit, allowing him to choose which option he would prefer. Will takes the aisle seat which makes it awkward for Hannibal to maneuver around him. Hannibal quickly decides to face Will as he skirts past him, wanting to see his reaction as he comes eye level with his cock. Will grips the armrests and turns his head slightly to the side. Hannibal is both disappointed and thrilled that Will doesn't blush. He has no shame. What a tantalizing quality to lack.

Will releases his grip from the armrests when Hannibal sits down. He can feel his body wading into the warm stream of relaxation. He sighs heavily, thankful for the peace running gently through his muscles.

“Rest well, my dear Will,” Hannibal murmurs as Will slips under the current of his dreams.

Will walks through his home in Wolf Trap, a spatial exercise he taught himself to try to control his nightmares. He enters the front door and sees Lukas sleeping on the couch in nothing but tight black boxers, hair spread loosely upon a pillow like a slumbering princess in folklore. The dogs are piled together on their beds or blankets. Zoe cocks her head up as Will walks past her to continue up the stairs to his room. Swarming shadows dance at the top of the stairs, a delicate ballet of weaving togetherness and falling apart. Will reaches his hand forward to dispel them while turning the knob to his closed bedroom door. The room is not his own. He's now in a gaudy funeral home parlor with ornate gold rosettes in the corners of the ceiling and spongy red carpet, the air is thick with the cloying scent of dead hibiscus. All of the chairs are empty. Tall columns for flower arrangements guard the casket on either side. These too are empty. He steps further into the room, closer to the casket his father lays in. It's lined with white silk. Will looks over his father's body, the skin covering his hands is paper thin and covered with brown age spots. Will forces his eyes up, to look at his father's face. They glued his lips shut. Sealing in whatever hateful last words that still ping around in his chest like angry bees. His mouth looks tense, jaw muscles cording with strength. The glue starts to rip. His bottom lip now free from the top but missing a wide strip of skin for his trouble. Green river water spills out from between his teeth, bits of twigs and leaves push forward to litter the front of his suit. Will can taste the brackish water in his own mouth. A small black felt hand reaches out to open the mouth further, gripping the bottom teeth. Another pops out to lift from the top lip. The mouth pries open obscenely wide for a grotesque golliwog to shove his head through. He sings soulfully for Will, "there ain't no place in this whole wide world, for one lonely boy".

Will closes the casket, warm enough to feel like skin, and takes two steps back. The little creature continues to sing, voice not muffled at all by its trappings, "you got to get it, before it get you". Water continues to trickle out from the casket onto the red carpet. Will turns away from the scene and bumps into something solid. He lets his gaze drift upwards, seemingly for a full minute. A large pig with tusks stained from use, towers over him balancing a half of roughly broken watermelon between his hooves.

"Hey, graham cracker. Wanna bite?"

Will gasps loudly and wakes. His pinkie finger tingles with warmth. He looks over to see Hannibal's hand casually placed next to Will's, with only the barest of touches. Hannibal sleeps peacefully with the corners of his eyes crinkled in delight. Will leaves his hand next to Hannibal's for comfort as the plane starts its descent.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal arrive in Louisiana. They go to their hotel before attending the funeral. Will recommends going to a bar afterward where they meet some of his old police squad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14

Will allows himself to be whisked around by Hannibal since he is still under the haze of abruptly ended heavy sleep. The warmth from his hand pressing into the small of Will's back to guide him here and there is oddly comforting and distracts Will from the too bright sounds and loud smells of the airport. Hannibal gracefully maneuvers through the airport quickly enough that Will barely has time to notice his anxieties until they are approaching the sleek black rental car in the parking lot. The Jaguar emblem grins at Will, full of unspoken animal need, tufts of hair and ragged scraps of flesh cling in its teeth, the red background oozing like a sore wound.

Hannibal tries to ignore the itch in his palms to test this supercharged car out on the nearest highway, pressing the metal pedal to the floor so that the rush of speed and danger can distract him from his thoughts of Will. Will in a suit. Will in the crystal-clear pool that was advertised on the hotel website. Shampooing Will's hair in the full-sized bathtub that Hannibal made sure his room was equipped with. Dr. Du Maurier warned him that his interest in his new patient is bordering obsession, not to mention how unethical this little trip is. Will Graham is to remain off limits as a friend, or otherwise, as long as he's under Dr. Lecter's care. He reminded Dr. Du Maurier that Will isn't officially under his care. They are only having conversations. And Hannibal isn't the type to deny himself pleasure. Especially when it's in the form of someone as rare as Will Graham is.

The car is clean and comfortable but most importantly the ac doesn't smell like stale cigarettes. The ride is smooth and without errors, almost like Hannibal has been here before, anticipating the guidance from the gps. Will adds this observation to his growing list of things that annoy him about Doctor Hannibal Lecter. Why does he have to be so put together all the time? So goddamn dignified?

I could take you apart. I could break you to see how your innards pulse and vibrate. Maybe keep a piece for myself. Bury that piece deep inside to become more like you.

Will takes a breath to steady himself, exhaling those invasive thoughts like dandelion seeds in the wind. He can't entertain those ideas with company nearby. Especially when said company has such a keen sense of smell, he could probably detect his arousal. Will wonders what his scent would be. Probably something unbecoming like wet dog or earthy mushrooms.

The car breaks unexpectedly as Hannibal doubts the feminine voice instructing him to turn right to arrive at their destination. Hannibal's entire body frowns as he pulls in to park in the weed cracked cement lot. The hotel is nothing like the pictures. Someone took those pictures when the hotel was in its prime but failed to update its slow decline into decayed depression. It reminds Will of when families use yearbook pictures for dead parents even though they died well into their nineties. Youth is just easier to look at when you're trying to deny your own inevitable demise.

"This isn't at all like the website."

"Probably twenty years ago it was." Will snarks.

You can practically smell the mold from the outside.

"There was mention of a refreshing pool, but I don't see one."

He can feel Hannibal bristle next to him like a cat. "Maybe the rooms are better?" He offers unhelpfully.

Hannibal doesn't respond, instead he turns the engine off and pops the trunk to retrieve their bags.

They get out of the car and gather their things, aware of the space between them and walk to the front entrance with their bags. Hannibal carefully skirts the cracks in the cement and the plethora of mostly cigarette litter while Will obliviously plows ahead. Will reaches the building first and peeks around the corner.

"There's your pool," he says, enjoying the disappointed look on Hannibal's face as he registers the foot or two of murky green water puddling at the bottom of the drained pool.

Will feels the hot orange coil of Hannibal's anger burn from his chest into the space around him. It's a purposeful anger, one that usually has a means to an end. But it's quickly snuffed out and replaced with that inscrutable look he usually wears. It's only a flicker but it makes Will wonder if Hannibal has ever gotten his knuckles bloody.

The blast of chilled air is refreshing as they walk through the main doors but as they continue further into the building the air feels thick with the dust of decades never aired out. There's a hazy dimness to the yellow lighting that makes Will question what time it is. Their footsteps sound stickily on the tacky floor. The young woman at the desk idles with her phone, snapping bright pink gum between her teeth. Her buzzed hair showcases the regal shape of her head better suited to be on a coin than in this dreadful building. Hannibal prepares to clear his throat to get her attention but years in the service industry has fine-tuned her senses to the needy. She looks up with a dazzling, albeit, practiced smile on her face. The strategically applied highlighter on her dark skin illuminates in the dreary room. Her beauty glows. Hannibal finds himself taken aback for a moment, stilled to silence. He quickly scans for her name tag to recover.

"Good morning, Brianna. Dr. Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham checking in. I had requested an early check in."

"Of course, good morning sirs. Just a moment." She taps away at the keyboard and then places two keycards on the counter. "You're both on the second floor, the elevator is to your right. Mr. Graham you are in room 210 and Dr. Lecter you are in room 218. Enjoy your stay." She smiles again with the gum hidden away in her cheek.

"Thank you," Hannibal says.

As they wait for the elevator, Will considers its safety given the general state of the hotel. It opens before he has a chance to suggest the stairs. They tuck themselves inside, Will waits a moment before chiding Hannibal.

"I think she's a little young for you."

"Beauty knows no age."

Will rolls his eyes. "I hope you've never said that near a playground. Did you really have to toss in that you're a doctor?"

"Does it offend you that I don't deny what I am?"

"What I find offensive is your abhorrent flirting skills. They have classes you can take. Maybe become a doctor in that."

"I assure you that I don't need assistance when it comes to matters of the heart."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Will retorts.

Hannibal silently accepts this challenge.

They ascend without issue. The doors open and they exit with their luggage.

Now Will is the one with the disappointed look on his face when he sees Hannibal turn to walk to the other end of the hall to where his room is located. He thought they would be closer, share the same wall. Hannibal checks his watch.

“We have exactly two hours to unpack and dress. The cemetery is only a half hour drive,” Hannibal says into the space between them.

They each wait for the other to part first, ultimately deciding at the same time to turn away from each other.

Will goes the short distance to room 210 and uses his keycard to unlock the door. He lets the door swing open wide as he peers inside. It’s dark. Even with the full sun scorching outside as if autumn isn’t drawing near, not now, not ever, that’s only a date on the calendar, nothing more. Will drags his belongings inside and shuts the door behind him letting the dark swallow him whole. He flicks on a dim light on to better survey the room. It isn’t terrible. Certainly not the worst he’s slept in. It looks clean enough. Will goes to the bed to roughly pull the blanket and sheet away from the foot of the mattress. He accesses the seam, looking for dried blood left behind from cimex lectularius. Also known as bedbugs. Clean. Will sits on the edge of the bed and sighs.

Hannibal walks down to the opposite end of the hall to 218. He uses his keycard to unlock the door. It blinks red then green then red again. Hannibal swipes the card again against the pad. The light blinks red. Hannibal huffs. He holds the keycard against the pad. The light blinks green and unlocks. He opens the door to his room and pulls his luggage inside, shutting the door behind him. He unzippers the front compartment of his bag to retrieve a pair of house slippers. He takes his outdoor shoes off, slipping into the house slippers one at a time, never letting his socks touch the carpet. He flicks on all of the lights and goes to the window to open the curtains. But the room still feels dark and heavy. It feels like the last stop, the place someone would go to when there are no other places left. Hannibal shudders. He goes to the bathroom and turns on the light. The bathtub is large, big enough for two people. Certainly, big enough for the water bug trying to scamper up the sloped side of the tub. Little mountains of mold are stacked in each corner on the edge of the bathtub where it meets the wall. Hannibal’s nostrils flare. He quickly dispatches of the crunchy bug with a generous wad of toilet paper, flushing its carcass down the toilet. Now two out of his three fantasies are ruined, no nighttime swimming, no romantic bubble bath. All he has left is to enjoy the sight of Will in his suit. Hannibal starts to unpack so that he can get dressed for the funeral.

Will doesn’t bother unpacking; he can live out of his bags for a few days. He’s used to being unsettled. He freshens up in his bathroom before putting on his suit. The pants are a little tight and the blazer sleeves are a touch long but even he has to admit that he looks quite nice. The suit material is soft and light against Will’s hot skin. He’s thankful that Hannibal had the wherewithal to choose a breathable fabric. What Will isn’t thrilled about is how the white and grey threads seem to highlight the white and grey hairs threading in his beard and hair. Will checks himself in the mirror, turning a little to assess the fit of the pants, his ample

ass and thighs slightly stretch the fabric. He hopes the heat outside will loosen the fit a bit. He adjusts himself to the right before leaving his room.

Hannibal is already standing in the hallway halfway between Will's door and the elevator, waiting for Will. He checks his watch once more as he hears the door close.

"Six minutes late. Which is fine. I accounted for some buffer time in the event of traffic or," Hannibal looks up and sees Will.

His mouth waters at the sight. He lets his eyes roam Will's body, drinking him in. He was right, the navy accents his blue eyes as well as his dark hair. The sleeves of the blazer are but an inch too long, easily tailored. And the pants. The pants are tight in all the right places, with the outline of Will's cock just barely visible. Hannibal swallows.

Will's body warms to a feverish degree under the groping of Hannibal's gaze.

"The sleeves aren't supposed to be this long, right? And I think the pants are a little tight. I must've put on some weight since the last time I wore that suit in my closet."

"Perfect," Hannibal quietly says.

Will raises a brow. "Yeah, well I hope they don't split."

Hannibal grins while hoping for the opposite.

They take the elevator down to the lobby and pass the front desk. Both Will and Hannibal look for Brianna, each for their own reasons but she isn't there to be used as a pawn in their little games.

They exit the cool and dark hotel into the searing sun which chokes the vision from their underprepared eyes, forcing them to reach for their sunglasses nestled in their breast pockets

at the same time. They walk to the car, parting to their respective sides. Hannibal opens the back passenger door and removes his blazer, placing it on the convenient hook. Will watches him.

"To prevent creasing. I suggest you do the same," Hannibal remarks as he gets into the car.

Will does as he's told and then gets into the car. He quickly side-eyes Hannibal's choice in sunglasses, a narrow round shape with tortoise shell colored frames. A stylish retro choice compared to Will's aviator style, a classic cop choice that he's never changed.

"Are we wearing the same suit?" Will uses the security of the dark lenses to look over Hannibal's trousers. He doesn't have to wonder which side Hannibal prefers to let his cock lay. It's the left.

"It's not the same suit."

"I think it's the same suit," Will says.

"Will, I know you are perfectly capable of discerning the difference between navy and charcoal."

"Okay, it's the same suit but in a different color."

Hannibal reverses the car with a heavy foot on the gas pedal, the tires squeal as he turns the wheel.

"Take it easy there, what will the neighbors say," Will says.

Hannibal clenches his jaw. Will quickly looks out his window to hide his smirk.

Once they are en route, Hannibal opens her up a little on the windy back road dotted by shack style houses and expansive swatches of crispy land, testing the supercharged engine claim. Will slowly turns to watch Hannibal, eyeing the speedometer rapidly approaching eighty. Before Will can admonish him for speeding, Hannibal slows down to the limit set by the bullet pocked sign.

They arrive faster than Will is prepared for, mostly due to Hannibal's speeding. Hannibal astutely parks away from the clump of cars to make their hasty escape easier later, rocks pinging underneath the car as Hannibal slows his speed. Will is surprised at the number of vehicles and people cluttered in little groups chatting, some fan themselves while others use their hands to shield the sun from their eyes. Will takes a moment before exiting the car, looking over the brown barren small graveyard, most likely privately owned, requiring proof of church membership before burial, with the scrubbed yet cracked headstones. The whole place has an overused feeling to it. He decides to get this over with. Hannibal follows his lead as Will walks towards the hearse, the grass dryly crunching underfoot, blazers left forgotten in the car. A man from one of the circles closest to the hearse notices Will and excuses himself to walk over to Will and Hannibal.

"Will, my lawrd, I haven't seen you since you were a little bundle." He extends a thick veiny hamhock of a hand out to Will.

Will reluctantly shakes the stranger's moist hand.

"You don't remember me, huh? I'm your Uncle Jeb. And that there is your Uncle Jim," he points vaguely in the distance, "and the woman with the purple hat is your Aunt Jolie."

Will drops the man's hand to slide his own hand into his pocket to wipe the sweat away.

"Aunt and Uncle as in friends of my dad's?"

Jeb horcks a laugh. "Nahh, boy, like your people, your blood." He widens his stance and stands up taller. But not tall enough to block out the sun.

“My father was an only child.”

Jeb shakes his thick head. “William was one of eight. He’s being buried with our ma and pa and another brother and sister. He never mentioned us?”

Will closes his eyes against the beating sun, the inside of his eyes throb red.

“No, he never mentioned you or any of them. It was just the two of us. There were some nights I,” Will doesn’t finish.

Jeb sighs. “Aww, now don’t go all rubbery on me now. It was because a that mother of yours. What with the scandal an all. We just kinda,” Jeb trails off, watching the toe of his boot dig into the dirt.

“Abandoned your people, your blood.” Will finishes for him.

Hannibal tilts his head, fascinated with how easily Will can adopt the cadence of others so quickly.

“Now you just wait a minute. That’s not how it was attall.” Jeb huffs. “Birdie warned me you would be difficult.”

“That’s not her name,” Will says.

“What do you mean that’s not her name, that’s what we call her. Shoot.”

“Her name is Diwa. But she goes by an Americanized nickname for uncultured pigs like you that would disrespect her given name.” Will shoulders his way past Jeb, knocking into the brick wall of old muscle from many years of hard labor.

Jeb smirks. He catches Will's elbow with a hard grip. He leans in close to Will.

"Whatcha not gon do is stand there thinking that you're any better than me, boy, cause you moved to some city where they let all types co-mingle together. Nahhh. The pig can leave the farm but the stink of it will never leave him." He shoves Will away from him.

Will stumbles a little. He thinks for a moment with his head lowered, jaw tense. Then he grabs Jeb by the lapels of his blazer.

"Fuck you, Jeb." He sternly says into Jeb's broad face, his expression of shock mirrored back to him in Will's sunglasses. He lets go of his lapels, pushing him back a step and spits at Jeb's boots before turning to walk back to the car.

At a loss for words, Hannibal merely nods at Jeb before following Will back to the car. The door closes as they hear someone yelling for them to wait. A petite woman with dark brown skin and long black hair coiled into a thick braid jogs towards their car with her arm waving in the air. Hannibal looks to Will for direction. Will sighs and coasts his window partly down. She's at the car quicker than they anticipated for someone her age and small stature.

She hangs on the open window to catch her breath for a minute, fanning herself.

"Goddamn that Jeb and that rough mouth of his, pardon me lord." She rolls her eyes up to the sun-bleached blue sky.

"Diwa, I presume?" Will asks.

"Yeah, that's me. But you can call me Birdie." She smiles warmly at Will.

"What do you want from me, Diwa."

She frowns for a moment. “You need to come back and help put your father to rest. It was his last wish.”

“Tell me why my father was shunned for being with my mother and I’ll consider it.”

“We don’t have time for that now, it’s a long story. Maybe after this, during the reception?”

Will pushes the window button up to partition himself from Diwa.

“Wait, wait!” She knocks her knuckles against the glass.

Will looks through her, unblinking.

“She was a maid for that dump that they call a motel off the highway. Crows would steal shiny things from her cleaning cart. She followed one to its nest once, which was near the boatyard yer daddy worked at. Those damn birds stole small bolts from him too. And that’s how they met.”

Will doesn’t say anything.

Diwa looks over her shoulder at the clusters of people watching her. She lowers her voice.

“She was so young. Naïve. Just left home to be on her own. Who knows what was going on with her people. But yer pa could be charming when he wanted to be. And she was lonely. He didn’t want the baby,” she stops, “you, I mean. She did. Wanted to do better than her parents. They tried to make it work. But the only thing he was monogamous to was the bottle and anger seemed to be his constant companion. So, she left. She wanted to take you, but he wouldn’t let it happen. He wouldn’t let her come near you once she left. No one liked that he broke tradition by not marrying her. But it was her age that really set them off.” Diwa reaches into her purse to retrieve a flimsy slip of yellowed paper.

“This is her number.” She slides the paper carefully through the window to Will, waiting for him to take it.

Reluctantly, he takes it and looks at the number. There isn’t a name.

“What’s her name?”

Diwa’s face pales. “He never told you? That bastard,” she says quietly, “Molina, is her name.”

“Thank you,” Will says curtly as he coasts the window back up.

“Hey!” Diwa shouts while she slaps the glass separating them. “I thought you was coming back?”

Will looks at her with hateful eyes. “No. There’s nothing here for me.” He cocks his head to Hannibal. “Get us the fuck away from these people.”

Will clenches his fist around the slip of paper, crumbling it into a tiny ball. He coasts the window down and holds his still clenched fist out the window for a moment, deciding. He opens his hand to let the wind take the paper from him. He presses the button for the window to close and wipes his palm on his knee.

“You’re not curious?” Hannibal asks.

“No,” Will snaps.

The silence between them now is uncomfortable, something that hasn’t happened before. Will scolds himself.

“If Diwa Wyatt can find my number and call me, then my mother can certainly do the same.”

“Do you have no sympathy for her circumstances?”

“Sympathy is between shit and syphilis in the dictionary, right where it belongs,” Will says. He crosses his arms over his chest like a petulant child.

The silence settles around them, heavy and suffocating, like a dark thunderous cloud waiting to storm away all the delicately balanced moments shared between them. It could be ruinous if left without the proper barriers in place. It could separate them. Hannibal isn’t keen on yet another misunderstanding between them.

“Dare I broach this topic given your current mood, but I can’t stand to let misunderstandings fester into resentment.”

Will rolls his eyes and leans his head back against the cushy rest.

“Yeah, okay. What do you want to talk about?”

“Correct me if I am amiss, but did you think that I was implying that you have some sort of crush on Brian Zeller the other day in the lab?”

Will scoffs. “More than one serving sounded like you were appraising his dick size. Why you would think I care about his dick is beyond my scope of empathy.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

Will stares accusingly at Hannibal. “Then what did you mean? Please enlighten me.”

“It was a poorly executed pun with regards to his generosity and his stature.”

Will looks away. “It sounded like you wanted to make a meal of him. Eat him up.”

Shall I set the table?

A flicker of choice dances in Hannibal’s eyes. He seizes her hand and spins.

“He would have to dry age for a few weeks for the inflammation to recede from all of that alcohol he drinks. Any sooner and the taste wouldn’t be desirable.”

“Funny,” Will says.

Hannibal’s heart rate increases just a tick.

“I’m not joking. Various consumables affect how we taste. If a cow escapes her pen and roams the farm, eating onion grass, not only will her milk be tinged green, but it will also have a slight onion taste and aroma.”

“Then there is some merit to the, you are what you eat, adage. Is this left-over dark humor from your surgeon days?” Will keeps his gaze on the passing scenery out the window.

“Not at all. Just day to day observations.” Hannibal grips the steering wheel.

“Just day to day observations, maybe if you’re a cannibal.” Will mumbles.

“Was I meant to hear that or were your mumbles meant only for yourself?”

When Will doesn't respond Hannibal asks another question. "Now that we have some extra time, what would you like to do?"

Will sighs. "I guess go back to the hotel. Maybe I'll order room service and work on a case or three."

Hannibal's grip relaxes and his heart rate returns to its low resting pulse.

Will bites the inside of his cheek. "I think the co-ed abductor is a cannibal."

Hannibal's expression doesn't change. Will presses on.

"And I think that the Chesapeake Ripper is a cannibal. And I think that the daisy and the candy case are the same person, that person being a cannibal. So, it's quite serendipitous you mentioning how commonplace cannibalism is. Maybe you could relay that to Jack."

"He doesn't agree with your profiles?"

"He doesn't think it's statistically possible to have three active cannibals at once. But I corrected him to two."

Hannibal sharply inhales.

"Yeah, I know, quite the leap of assumption but I think the Chesapeake Ripper has come out of retirement and those two new cases of mine are his work."

Hannibal briefly glances at Will, speechless.

Will's personal phone alerts him to a text. He reaches into his pocket for it and checks the screen. He huffs. "It's like he knows I'm thinking about him." He shows the screen to Hannibal.

Hannibal doesn't look.

"Aww, it's pictures of my dogs." Will scrolls through them. He pauses at the last one of Zoe. His tears momentarily blur her little face and he's thankful for the dark glasses to conceal his emotions. She looks thinner. How she can look thinner in a matter of hours doesn't seem possible to Will.

"You were thinking about Lukas? Is he another person to add to your cannibal list?"

Will sniffles and clears his throat. "No, I umm, was actually wondering what was going on with you two?"

"Pardon?"

"He very obviously was vying for your attention, but you seemed bored by him. I'm not sure if that's because you already fucked him or if you have no intention of doing so."

Hannibal doesn't miss a beat. "He's a little young for me." The corners of his mouth quickly quirk up.

"I thought beauty knows no age?"

"I like to let my meat marinate, age to perfection."

Will shakes his head. "You are strange, Dr. Lecter. Interesting, but strange."

“You have no idea,” Hannibal says.

Will wants nothing more than to stick to his previous suggestion of going back to the his room in the hotel. But just one look at Hannibal's pitiful face as they park in the hotel lot forces him to change his mind. Hannibal said there was mold in the corners of his bathtub. Will doesn't want to break it to him that there's probably mold in every corner of his room.

“There's a bar around here somewhere if it hasn't been torn down. I know I could use a drink or several. Up for a little walk?” Will smiles. It's more grimace than smile.

“Sounds pleasant. Lead the way.”

Even with the blazers left in the car they're both unhappy and uncomfortable. The humidity is doing unkind things to Will's hair, frizzy out the ends while thick clumps limply hang down. And Hannibal keeps wiping at the persistent beads of sweat with a perfectly creased handkerchief, which is becoming less perfectly creased with each use and more annoyingly rumpled.

To Will's surprise and dismay, the bar that he used to frequent while he was on the police force is still standing, well maybe more like leaning. Hannibal holds the door open for Will as they enter the bar. Nearly every patron swivels in their seats to ogle the newcomers. They both remove their sunglasses, sliding them into the front pocket of their now slightly damp button-down. Will quickly scans the crowd for any of his old team. But it's too early in the day for them to be out yet. They have time.

“I'll order us a drink.” Hannibal offers.

“Hey,” Will whispers as he catches Hannibal by the elbow. He certainly has Hannibal's attention. “I'm going to postulate that a place like this won't have thirty-dollar whiskys. And, ahh,” Will leans closer. “Maybe keep the lexicon to something more akin to a high schooler,” Will's eyes dart to the bartender. “Middle school. Just to be safe.”

“Why my dear Will, aren't you just too precious? You're over here throwing a hissy fit when alls I want is a bourbon neat. Whatever they's got is best, I'm not picky, only thirsty.”

Hannibal's voice becomes more nasally and high in the throat. The accent is perfect. Even his face has softened around the edges.

Will can only stare with his mouth open. “How did you do that? Who are you?” He asks with a slight chuckle as Hannibal walks to the bar to place their drink orders.

Hannibal turns to Will to wave him over to the stool to his left. Will's dazed feet carry him over to Hannibal. He sits down heavily with a sigh like an old dog settling down on his favorite cushion for the night. The bartender puts their drinks down in front of them. Will picks his up first and takes a sip. His eyes hover over Hannibal, watching as he tastes the cheap liquor. He doesn't even flinch. Instead, he makes a satisfied smacking noise.

“How long do you plan on keeping this up?”

“You're barking up the wrong tree there, fella,” Hannibal says.

Will's smile beams. This is the first time he's felt truly content with another person, since, he can't remember since when. Which demands another drink. He signals to the bartender. Hannibal breaks character for a fraction of a second, eyes glazing over with regret for having to drink more of this so-called whiskey. Will laughs.

The alcohol is hitting them harder than they expected. It could be any number of things that lead to this, the heat, the lack of a full meal, the high alcohol content of said drink. Or perhaps it's something simpler. That they're under the influence of each other’s presence.

Someone puts a couple of quarters in the jukebox. Will recognizes the guitar chords but refuses to acknowledge them. A raspy acid worn voice bellows, “ohh suzie q.” Then Will feels the hi-hat tapping through his fingertips. Hannibal watches with keen eyes.

“Enjoying some nostalgia, are we? Was Suzie your first girl's name? Or was it Mary? Good golly, don’t tell me, was it a miss Molly? Was it the way she walked?” Hannibal bumps his shoulder into Will's playfully.

“Shut up. I bet yours was something like,” Will clears his throat, “Helga.” His German accent is appalling. There isn’t enough bourbon in the world for him to try a Lithuanian accent in front of Hannibal.

Hannibal's smile falls flat.

Will balks. “I did not just do that.”

Hannibal grins. “What's your boss's name youngin, hmm? I'm gonna let him know his agent got the hoodoo working for him. I'll be damned if that wasn't her name.”

It most certainly was not her name. In fact, Hannibal’s first paramour wasn’t a her at all. His name is Akito Fujiki and he currently lives in France with Chiyoh Shikibu, his Aunt Murasaki’s daughter from before she married his Uncle Robert. They have their own business building motobikes. He sent Hannibal his latest model a few months back.

Will relaxes by finishing his drink. Hannibal cringes internally when Will signals for yet another refill.

“You've got to be shitting on me? As I live and breathe! It's graham cracker the watermelon smacker!”

His shoulders tense up defensively. He turns to fully face the door to stare down the crew that just entered. Three of the men were part of Will's old team, the other two young guns are fresh recruits. One of them he knew as a kid for a short span of time before his dad moved them to Mississippi for a spell before moving back to Louisiana nearly a decade later.

“Beau Bennett,” Will says.

They all make their way over to Will, eyeing up Hannibal along the way.

“You remember Ardy Orville and Tuck Sterling. These two young bucks are Earl Walker and Ace Greyson.” He envelops the recruits in a tight, uncomfortable embrace. “Fresh from the academy. You can practically still smell the polish on their boots.”

Will simply nods with a thin-lipped smile.

“Who's this dapper fella?” Beau aggressively tilts his head to Hannibal.

Hannibal rises from his bar stool, standing to full height to shake Beau's hand.

“The name's Atticus Darcy.”

Beau finally lets Earl and Ace from his grasp to squeeze Hannibal’s hand, cracking two of his knuckles from his efforts, sending a flare of anger in Hannibal’s strange red eyes.

“Uhh huh. Whatcha doing here, just drinking the two of yous?”

Will takes a steady breath. “Old man finally gave up the ghost.” He finishes his newly refilled drink.

“And what, you needed an escort?” The young guns snicker, looking to Beau for approval.

Hannibal remains standing, looming over the other men like a shadow.

“Well, FBI agents rarely get a day off, even in death I imagine his phone will still be gripped in his hand,” Hannibal says.

Will reaches for Hannibal's untouched drink to help himself.

“Is that right? You're a big-time agent now?”

“Something like that.” Will doesn't look at him.

“Another round for my FBI friends here.”

Hannibal slumps a couple inches. Ardy whistles from a table and points. Earl and Ace bound over like the validation seeking toddlers that they are. Will gets up slowly, feeling the whisky numbing his thighs. Beau reaches forward for Will's shoulder to pull him in for a side hug. An imperceptible snarl lifts Hannibal's lip. Tuck claps Hannibal on the shoulder.

“Don't let Beau rile ya. He's a shit stirrer but a damn fine cop. You know him and Graham grew up together. Well, not really but kinda. Graham moved around these parts when they were like six or seven and stayed for a couple years. Until his daddy had to run from the bill collectors that came a-knocking. It was such a surprise when they came back when he was nineteen. He joined the pd right away.” They walk over to the table together.

Beau's laughing heartily. “You've told Atticus the story, right?”

Will shakes his head no.

“Ohh you've got to tell him. I'll start to set the scene. There was this pig farmer, you see. He had this garden where he grew his own crops for personal use.” He pauses to say to Will. “Wouldn’t ya know it, we popped him for jane a few years ago, growing right in the middle of some corn. Anyways, he’s got this fucking fence around his land as if he owned it to keep us kids out. Well graham cracker here was just a runt back then, so I'd bribe him to wiggle under the fence to snag whatever he could find. And it's a real bugger of a summer afternoon. I mean, your sweat's sweating. I really had a cravin for watermelon. But damned if cracker here doesn't pick the biggest fucking melon and he can't get it under the fence. Go ahead you finish,” he flicks his eyes to Will.

“And farmer Ron comes running with his shotgun as I'm trying to shove this watermelon under the fence. It's not going to fit. I try to climb the fence with one hand while I'm balancing the melon and I hear, git em! His dog comes tearing out from probably the gates of hell, snarling and barking.”

Beau waves his hand. “Hold your horses, you're not telling it right. So, he's struggling with the melon, small as he was, just look at those hands! And the dog just launches, I mean really goes for it. And Graham,” he breaks for laughter, “just decides fuck it and throws his body over the other side of the top of the fence looped with razor wire. The melon smacks against the ground and opens up. I run for it before the bees can get at it. Will's laying on the ground grabbing his balls and muttering about not being able to find them.” Beau's ears and cheeks are red from laughing at Will's expense.

“They retracted.” Will finishes Hannibal's drink.

The table erupts in laughter. Beau leans forward, wheezing. He grabs his crotch.

“I'm finna water myself. Let me out.” He hurries to the restroom.

The men exchange glances as the laughter dies down. Earl and Ace check their phones. Tuck eyes Will and Hannibal, trying to sus out their deal. Hannibal holds Tuck’s gaze with unflinching resolve. Ardy nudges Tuck to look over at Ace’s phone. Will takes this opportunity to excuse himself to get a refill at the bar. He looks back to see that everyone has turned their attention to Hannibal, who now is no doubt telling them some made up yarn. Will makes his way to the restroom.

Beau is washing up at the sink when the door swings open.

“Graham cracker!” He smiles at Will's reflection in the mirror. Then he turns serious. “I don't think you were looking to meet me in here. You know I don't go for that.” He grabs several paper towels to dry his hands.

Will steps into the bathroom to stand behind Beau. “Some manners would do you some good.” Will hates how easy it is to slip back into the soft southern accent that he's tried to

hide while living in Virginia. How easy it is to let anger puppet his limbs into action. How he can become anyone he wants. Right now, the feeling of contempt fits him better than his new suit. Violence feels as good as wading into a cold stream.

Beau turns around to be face to face with Will. “Did you some good, didn't it? Good enough for the F B I. Bet yer daddy still wasn't proud, huh?” He sizes Will up, focusing on his hands. “You've still got those tiny, little hands. Don’t tiny hands just make everything look bigger?”

Will looks to the door. “You know, Beau. It isn't smart to piss off a guy that thinks about killing people for a living.”

Beau smirks. “You've always been more bark than bite.”

Will headbutts Beau with such force that Beau's neck snaps back. The back of his head smacks against the mirror, cracking the glass into webs. Beau's glazed eyes try to focus on Will. He touches his hand to the blood seeping from his forehead. He looks down at his redden fingertips, then looks to Will.

“Ohh, you're a dead man,” he says.

Will swiftly punches the air from Beau's gut. He folds forwards, gasping. Will shoves him to the piss sprinkled floor. He leaves the restroom and looks to Hannibal to try to catch his attention. Hannibal smells the blood on Will before he sees him. His head slowly lifts to find Will. Their eyes meet. Will mouths, “go” to which Hannibal nods while quickly rising from his seat, face sobering in an instant. Tuck senses something is off and goes to stop Hannibal from leaving.

Hannibal twists his arm to release Tuck's grip on his wrist, while shoving him off balance to sit back down. Earl and Ace make disapproving noises while they get up, putting themselves in front of Hannibal's path. Ace swings for a punch to Hannibal's jaw, missing by several feet. Hannibal raises a leg for a powerful push kick, knocking Ace into Earl like bowling pins. He steps over them. Earl weakly tugs on Hannibal's pant leg. It earns him a kick to the jaw. Ardy turns from the bar and his mouth drops open. He’s stopped in the middle of the bar on his way back to the table with a precariously balanced tray of beers.

Will stands stunned for a moment watching the graceful put-down by Hannibal. Asking himself again who Hannibal really is before briskly making his way to Hannibal. Ardy finally decides to put the tray down on the bar counter, reaching out for Will as he bustles past. Will grabs his wrist and turns his arm, Ardy yelps in pain. Will continues, his momentum urging him on, he twists Ardy's arm behind his back, pushing him face first onto the bar countertop. Will presses his body against Ardy's, letting him feel the semi erection throb against his back. Will uses his foot to spread Ardy wider beneath him. He leans further down to whisper in his ear.

"Think of me, Ardy. Next time you do this to a scared, crying sixteen-year-old girl. Remember this." Will nudges his cock against Ardy once more for effect before letting him go.

Ardy starts to collect himself, but Will rapidly punches him in the kidney to keep him from rising. Will catches up with Hannibal and they're almost to the door when they hear the restroom door slam open.

"Git em, Tuck, don't just sit there!" Beau is still clutching his stomach with a stream of blood running into his eye.

Tuck is out of his chair, knocking it to the floor. He's within punching distance in mere seconds when a strong arm holds him back.

"Leave it be," Detective Ressler says.

Tuck turns to argue, eyes motioning to Beau but Ressler isn't moved to change his mind.

"I said drop it boy," he looks at Hannibal and Will. "I heard about yer daddy Will, my condolences, but now you gotta pound feet."

The three men stand stunned while exchanging glances. Hannibal looks over Ressler's shoulder to smirk at Tuck. He was really looking forward to making him bleed. Too bad. The other three make their way over to the Detective, who now seems to be in control of the scene. Beau stays back by the restroom.

"What are you still standing there for? Go on now." Ressler snaps.

Will nods and they leave the bar. Along with their tab for Beau to pick up.

A camera slips back into a purse. The woman stands up from her table, brushing at the creases in her pants as she makes her way through the gathering crowd. The men start to part to let her pass. She stops at the police officers.

"How would you boys feel about making a statement about what just happened?" Her voice is commanding for such a slim and delicate figure.

She can feel their eyes sizing her up, all thinking the same stupid question most men have when meeting her and saying it as if it's the most creative thing she's ever heard. *Does the carpet match the drapes?*

She tilts her head a little to allow her luscious red mane of hair shift off her shoulder.

"And just who are you?" Detective Ressler asks.

She smiles. "I'm Erin Kimbel and I work for Tattlecrime. I'm currently working on another expose about Will Graham. I've got some great pictures of the brawl. All that's missing are the statements of the poor unfortunate men that got in the way of a seriously unstable man."

Beau lets go of his stomach to fully take in Erin. He hurries over to the crowd, not wanting to be left out. She feels his eyes on her before he's in front of her. He keeps staring.

She doesn't shy away from its intensity, holding it steady until he's uncomfortable and looks away.

"What does a girl like you like to drink?" He asks the wall behind her.

"The blood of my foes but a nice gin and tonic will suffice. Shall we sit?"

Chapter End Notes

Are we having fun yet? : D

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal share stories about their pasts while revealing how they feel in the present.

Chapter Notes

The tags mention something about slow burn but I think it's time to fan the flames a little.

Chapter 15

Will pops open the first three buttons of his white shirt revealing a thatch of dark chest hair as he retrieves his sunglasses from his front pocket. Collapsing onto his bed back at the hotel sounds delightful right about now but considering the vengeful eyes that may be watching them, Will decides to walk in the opposite direction. Hannibal trails slightly behind him with his own sunglasses affixed on his face.

Will closes his eyes tightly against the pulsing headache knocking around between his temples. His eyes spring open as his feet stumble from whisky bloated ankles. Hannibal reaches for Will's shoulder, Will bats an annoyed hand against his advances.

"I'm fine," he says.

Hannibal searches Will looking for blood or ripped seams. He appears to be unscathed. Will feels Hannibal staring at him so he stops to turn a stare back at him, challenging him.

"What?" Will asks.

Correction. Mostly unscathed. A purple bloom of a bruise unfurls above Will's eyebrow, a slim cut across his skin with dried blood in the center. Something in Hannibal clenches at the sight. He tenderly reaches forward to brush Will's curls back to better see the mark.

"I told you I'm fine," Will says although he leans into the soothing touch.

"May I?" Hannibal reaches for Will's sunglasses.

Will nods for Hannibal to remove them. He does, slipping Will's sunglasses into his own pocket for the time being. Hannibal pulls his sunglasses up to rest atop his head as he places his hands on either side of Will's face to check his pupils for uneven dilation.

"Any ringing in your ears?" He asks softly.

"No," Will says.

"Excellent. No need to worry about a concussion." Hannibal removes his hands from Will's face and picks up his hands to assess his knuckles. Blue and purple bruises dust his skin. "An expected amount of swelling but nothing appears to be broken. Some ibuprofen and ice will benefit you later this evening." Hannibal keeps holding Will's hands in his own.

Will looks into Hannibal past the strange, maroon-colored eyes, past the courtesy and politeness and into the gospel of the man himself. Hannibal holds steady under the pin of Will's scrutiny. A fleeting feeling of want tugs at Will, pulling into need, surging into something else. Something dangerous. Will wishes he could swim in this moment, let it rise above his head pulling him under its current to have his thoughts washed away. Blissfully blank and clean. It both lasts for too long and not long enough.

A passerby throws a fast-food paper bag into the trashcan that they are standing in front of. Hannibal drops Will's hands and glares at the man passing them. Will wonders fleetingly if Hannibal's skin tastes like cinnamon.

Their moment is over. Hannibal hands Will back his sunglasses. With them placed back where they belong, Will starts to walk. Hannibal follows. The air that once felt refreshing after leaving the charged atmosphere of the bar now feels just as oppressive. Will considers for a moment what it would feel like to kiss Hannibal. Would Hannibal drape his body over every inch of his, feeling just as heavy and oppressive as this heat? Will swallows as he remembers his fantasy of Hannibal sucking the blood that covered his finger. The blood was too bright in his imaginings, almost artificial like it was chemical and dyed in a lab. Similar to the candy-coated corpse that was found in the barn. Of all the things to occupy his mind right now, Will shifts his focus to this, casework screaming loudly for attention.

I told you he's more than one serving.

"It's such a strange feeling. Sometimes I can hear you, your voice in my head when I get stuck on this co-ed case, or the new ones. Asking the right questions to lead me past my mental blocks. And then something like tonight happens and I realize I don't know you at all."

"If only you knew to ask."

Will tsks. "If only."

"Was Beau your partner?" Hannibal asks.

Will ignores the double entendre. "Yeah, until I got stabbed and left for D.C."

"He failed to protect you."

Will shakes his head. "No, I failed to protect myself." Will leads them to turn down a side street.

They emerge from the dark, dank alley to the open sea air of a wide street parallel with a boat launch. The unrelenting sun stains lake Pontchartrain with wavy glowing streaks. A few boats ferry commuters to the other side of the lake.

“There's a Mr. Potato right around the corner. Want some fries and a lemonade? My treat.” The offer is malicious. There are plenty of decent restaurants to take Hannibal to, they’re dressed well enough to even get into some of the fine dining establishments. But Will wants to make Hannibal suffer a little, watch him slum it by eating fries out of a brown paper bag with splotches of oil spreading across it, dainty fingers plucking at the food with disdain.

“Do they have air conditioning?”

“It's their only saving grace,” Will says, surprised by Hannibal even entertaining the idea.

Hannibal nods his consent so Will continues to lead them there. They shuffle along in their shiny shoes in silence for a little while, which Hannibal desperately wants to shatter like a fragile teacup.

“Will, I am trying my best to respect these arbitrary boundaries you have constructed between us, but I must confess that I'm finding it rather difficult to navigate.”

“Not used to relinquishing control, are we, Doctor?”

“On the contrary, I can do so when it's mutually beneficial to both parties. Neither of us seem to be gaining anything from this arrangement.”

Will keeps looking forward.

“May I ask questions?”

“You may do whatever you want. But I will decide if I participate.”

“Were you stabbed because you refused to shoot a suspect?”

A small nod from Will confirms Hannibal's assumption. Will opens the door to Mr. Potato, even the handle on the outside feels tacky with old oil. The blast of cool fried potato air refreshes their reddened cheeks and sweat dampened necks. They both tuck away their sunglasses. Hannibal takes a seat on a stool at the long table set up to look out the window at the lake. After a few minutes, Will comes back with the food and drinks and sits next to Hannibal. They pick at the fries and sip at the just sweet enough lemonade in silence while a synthy pop song plays from the overhead speakers. It feels like how Will imagines the morning after prom would feel awkward and out of place, them in their nice clothes in a fast-food joint trying to remain casual after sharing something intimate which neither of them will ever forget.

“What does it feel like being back home?” Hannibal asks.

Will wipes his fingertips with the brown paper napkin. “I wouldn’t really call this home. We moved around a lot, different states. He just decided to come back here to die.” Will senses a longing about Hannibal. “When was the last time you were home?”

“It feels like centuries. Mainly because I know I can never return.”

“Bad memories tend to poison places, people even. But I’ve noticed that nostalgia does that too. It adds this rosy feeling as if things weren’t always shit. People reminisce about being a kid and not having responsibilities as if their parents arguing late into the night about bills and Christmas never kept them awake.” Suddenly Will wishes for something stronger than the lemonade.

“The only tangible avenue between truth and memory being our scars. Tell me about your scars, Will.”

“I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.” Will keeps his eyes focused on the lake as his tongue searches for the plastic straw before wrapping his lips around it for a long sip.

Hannibal watches with rapt attention. He places his left hand on Will's fist clenched around the napkin. Will stops drinking and looks down. Hannibal turns his hand over to reveal a thin scar along the base of his thumb and up his forearm.

"I broke my metacarpal while defending my younger sister from some playground bullies. My thumb still tingles whenever I think of her."

"Are you not in contact with her anymore?"

"Not in the common ways. She died years ago."

Will can feel Hannibal's longing creep over him like ivy, wrapping around his heart and delicately squeezing. It tastes like ash. Saying sorry feels weak, instead Will decides to tell Hannibal about his shoulder scar.

"We got a call about an illegally parked car; some guy owned this tool shop and wasn't happy to see this rusty shit bucket waiting for him when he goes to open the store. Apparently, he peaked in the window and was displeased that a young mother and her baby were asleep in there. He didn't tell us about the baby." Will pauses for more lemonade for his suddenly dry throat.

"The beat we were assigned to was mostly petty shit and misplaced druggies. I thought she was sleeping off whatever her drug of choice was before going home to the parents. I knock on the window to get her attention. Her eyes. That's when I knew something was different. She's got this harpy knife hiding in her sleeve, I can barely make out the glint of the steel from the nearly three-inch blade, pushed against the now wailing bundle. I open the car door, surprised that it was unlocked, and then put my hands up to show her that I'm not going for my gun, I just want her to put the baby in my empty hands. Beau goes to the other side of the car to make a grab for the baby. She flips out. Throws the baby while coming at me with her knife. I catch the baby and the knife to my shoulder. She drove it in to the hilt. I felt the tip chip against my bone. Beau's got his gun drawn and he's yelling at her. And I just know he's going to drop her. She grabs for the knife again, but I shove her behind me and step in front of her. I've got the baby cradled in my left arm and the knife sticking out of my right shoulder with this woman clawing at my back as Beau is screaming at me to move. I'm fighting against the pain to keep from fainting because I know that if I fall, they will too."

Will stops as if the story is complete. Hannibal waits a respectable moment with bated breath for Will to continue.

When Will doesn't speak, Hannibal does. "So, what happened?"

"The shop owner heard the commotion and came out to rubberneck. He ends up strong arming the gun from Beau and calling our superior about the whole mess. I was pretty much shunned after that, so I left for D.C."

The overhead lights dim and the music cuts out. Will and Hannibal turn to look at the workers behind the counter. The short young black teen with the tight braids capped off with pink beads at the ends flicks his head toward the exit. They get the hint and clean up their trash before leaving.

They start sweating immediately once they're outside again. Will walks along the river's edge with Hannibal at his side. The sky is crowded with ominous dark swirling clouds. It feels like night is claiming her hours early.

"So far you've heard two embarrassing stories from my past and I've gotten half of one at best from yours. I think you owe me another story." Unsure of what to do with his hands, Will slips them into his trousers pockets. The cool silk against his hot thighs sends shivers down his back.

Hannibal stands in the candlelit foyer of his memory palace, modeled after the Norman Chapel in Palermo, frankincense burns thickly in the air. His placement is always respectably off to the side of the skull with its bony hands clasped in beseeching prayer graven in the floor, extracted from the Cornaro Chapel in Rome to serve as a memento mori here. He walks briskly to a hallway branching off to the right. Footfalls aren't the only sound that echoes here. His gaze wanders the doors that line this hall of his past quickly in search of a charming interlude from his childhood. He knows not to go past the seventh door on the left, where the hall tilts closer together and the floorboards are weak with rot. That door leads to the basement where the manner of things are less under his control. He opens the sixth door to be immediately greeted by a mastiff he had as a child named Rodger by Mischa. Hannibal lovingly pets the huge dog while ducking his head to avoid the swooping ortolans flying free from their cages. Inside the room near the bookshelf stands a small

wooden table with a black swan made of velvet on its glossy surface. Hannibal goes to the table and picks up the soft swan. A silver bracelet with Mischa engraved on it is loosely clasped around its slim neck. He rubs a finger against one of the amethyst stones embedded in the metal. Hannibal replaces the swan on the table, eying the small woven basket that also occupies the table. Hannibal plucks a fiddlehead from the tiny basket, gives one last pet to Rodger and leaves. He hurries out of his palace, swallowing the earthy green frond of spring. The journey takes him less than three seconds. Will has no idea how far Hannibal has traveled for this story.

"When I was sixteen, we held a party at the estate as a sort of beautillion ball to announce my eligibility for engagement."

"Sounds antiquated and boring. Just how old are you, Hannibal?"

"Very funny, Will. It was isolated where I grew up, so societal norms still hadn't progressed much. My sister was ten at the time and furious with all the peacocking young ladies vying for my attention. All Mischa wanted was one dance with me, but my card was full for the night. So, she runs outside and plunges into the pond that we kept for two black swans. She steals the female and comes running back inside the castle, with the male close behind, wings outstretched and hissing, dressing dripping mud," Hannibal's voice clashes with Will's as Will speaks over him.

"Hold on," Will interrupts. "Did you say castle?"

"Yes, I did."

"Are you a count, or some kind of royalty?"

"Maybe once, but not anymore."

"Why's that?"

“I think my title is among the burned remains of my home.”

“Do you mean that metaphorically or,” Will trails off, wondering if he’s being too curious.

“I mean that in the literal sense. The fires came later that evening. My mother was convinced at first that Mischa had something to do with it. It wasn’t until later when the metal collars were shackled around our necks that she let go of that notion.”

Will stops walking to focus on the right words to say. He sighs when nothing purposeful comes to him. *Chained like dogs*, echoes across his mind.

“What did they want?”

“Chaos. Dissolution of my family’s wealth to be parsed out amongst the poverty stricken. It was an idea I privately agreed with and sought to change once I was in charge. However, I was never given the chance.”

Will is baffled at how calmly he recalls such atrocities.

“How are you so well adjusted? I mean, it sounds like you had a worse childhood than I did but no one would know it. I feel like anyone can see the trauma sticking to me like spat out gum.”

“Because I killed them.”

Will watches Hannibal’s damned inscrutable face for a moment, eyes searching for a break, a trickle of a smirk. He wants to laugh. It’s a small tickle at first, containable in his body, but soon it overtakes him and he’s swallowing back against it.

Hannibal tilts his head slightly as he watches Will.

“More dark humor?” Will pushes down the giddy laughter bubbling inside himself.

Hannibal doesn’t respond.

Will furrows his brow. “Who put the metal collar around your neck?” Will stops walking to search Hannibal’s exposed throat for telltale whispers of faint scarring. Then he sees it, a hairline crack at the base of his adam’s apple.

Hannibal’s lips part to let his tongue dart out, tasting his bottom lip, tasting the memory of his sister’s flesh. It’s remarkably like his own. He inhales.

“Let’s save that story for another day,” Hannibal says.

“Yeah, sure.” Will shakes his head. “I’m sorry. I ruined what was supposed to be a lighthearted story. If you stick around long enough, you’ll notice that I tend to do that a lot. I like to make people uncomfortable, that’s what Jack says.” Will straightens up and takes a deep breath.

“Would it be at all possible for you to go a full day without mentioning Uncle Jack?”

Will kicks at a rock in his path. “Please continue, I want to hear about Mischa and the swans.”

They continue walking again and Hannibal picks up where he left off.

“Mischa runs through the banquet hall, past my mother and father, mouths gaping in astonishment as she bounds up the stairs with the swan lifted high over her head now. She turns to the crowd and screams, “swans are bonded for life!” Some of the party goers started to clap others boo. The male swan attacked Mischa’s ankles until she put his mate down. They waddled off back to their peaceful pond. Mischa took a bow before my mother spirited

her away to the kitchen for a lecture about the reading materials Mr. Jakov was supplying her with and to take the feminist essays with an ounce of caution."

They stop walking to lean against the humidity slick metal guard railing. Good humor lifts Will's features from his previous worry. Hannibal looks at him with adoration.

"I'm surprised that you still haven't asked me about what happened back at the bar," Will says with the aim of trying to take control of the discomfort he's feeling from being looked at like that.

"I trust your judgement," Hannibal says while still looking at Will with slightly raised brows.

A light mist settles in, dotting the ends of Will's curls with little orbs of orange reflected from the streetlights. A few more droplets cling to his eyelashes. Hannibal raises a hand to gently swipe at a larger raindrop on Will's cheek. His hand moves to hold the back of Will's neck, who's face tenses in confusion.

"You are remarkable, Will. Ruinous and uncomfortable behavior withstanding." Hannibal leans his head forward into Will's space, nearly resting their foreheads together.

Will's body wants to curl inward to protect itself from this vulnerable situation.

"Are you flirting with me, Doctor Lecter?" Will's eyes stay focused on the space just below Hannibal's eyes.

"Is it working?"

Will's throat feels thick and heavy. He nods.

"I would like to kiss you, Will. Would you like that?"

Electricity surges against his skin from Hannibal's touch, transformed from friendly to interested. All those little gestures, excuses to touch him, to linger, have all been culminating to this moment.

"Will?" Hannibal asks while adding delicious pressure to Will's neck.

Hearing his name sparks his lower belly into a flurry of blue-white explosions. No one says his name that way, like it's enjoyable, savored in the mouth. Not coughed out. Graham. Graham.

Hannibal releases the pressure, removing his hand from Will, moving his body out of Will's space. It feels wrong to Will, empty. Will leans forward, pushing into Hannibal's body, forcing him to take a step back to maintain his balance. Hannibal brings his hands up to Will's arms to steady him. The kiss is sloppy, half missed and teeth clattering together. Will leans back a little and goes for another. Their lips slot together then come away. Chaste. Testing. Will looks up at Hannibal, a little breathless.

"I wasn't sure. I didn't realize you felt this way," he struggles to say.

"Is this beyond your scope of empathy as well? To be wanted?"

Instead of answering, Will leans forward again, this time fully embracing Hannibal with his arms wrapped around his back for a deeper kiss. A sprinkle of raindrops fall against their shoulders like confetti. Then more, bigger drops. The sky opens up and rains down upon them in a cleansing sheet. They break apart.

Will looks to Hannibal with flickering lashes against the pelting rain.

"Now what?" He half yells over the rain pounding against the pavement.

“Run,” Hannibal says as he takes Will’s hand in his.

He leads Will back the way they came, winding through various side streets and alleyways to avoid the sudden flooding of low laying pavement. For an absurd moment the rain glitters against the road like melted snow. Steam starts to rise. And with it the heated asphalt smell of summer carelessness. A grin starts to overtake Will’s face, spreading across his mouth, reaching his eyes and even tingling the top of his scalp. He feels foolish until Hannibal looks back at him with a similar grin.

Their hands shift as they continue to run the streets, racing the rain to get back to the hotel. Fingers lace together against the storm. Will pulls ahead now to lure Hannibal into an alleyway. They stop, chests heaving, heat rising from their bodies to mix with the steam from the streets. Each cold droplet of water that falls from Will’s hair onto his exposed skin sends an explosion of pleasure to his core. *More.* He needs more. He pushes into Hannibal to force him against the wall behind him, bodies flushed together, peppering his neck with kisses before finding his way back to Hannibal’s mouth to push the strong muscle of his tongue against Hannibal’s to taste him. Hannibal doesn’t taste like cinnamon at all, his taste is rather human, clean, hot flesh. It’s better than Will imagined, it’s real. Will nudges his knee between Hannibal’s legs, pressing up against his erection. Hannibal gasps into Will’s mouth, breathing life into his very soul. Will moves his knee again while tracing the scar along Hannibal’s neck with his tongue. Hannibal’s hands maneuver down Will’s back, grabbing the swell of his firm glutes to pull him closer into his body. *Meld.* Will pants hotly nestled into Hannibal’s neck, inhaling the heated cologne discovered on his skin. He slides a hand down between them to grab at Hannibal’s twitching cock while his other hand grips Hannibal’s hip to keep him in place. Hannibal leans his head back against the damp bricks, biting his lip and closing his eyes to the sensations. Then Will is gone. Removed from him. Hannibal opens his eyes to look around anxiously. He spots Will running down another side street. Hannibal launches himself from the wall to chase after him.

It feels feral. Prey and predator. Each silently switching roles. Playing games in the dark.

Will reaches the awning of the hotel first. He barely catches his breath before Hannibal joins him. They manage to keep their hands off each other as they enter the hotel lobby. This time, neither of them pay any notice to who’s at the front desk. All that occupies their minds is how fast the elevator will arrive.

They make it to the door before Will pushes Hannibal against it for another slow kiss. It feels too good, too perfect. Like home. Hannibal reaches into Will's pocket for the

keycard. He slyly accesses the keypad, opening the door. They stumble into the room.

Will breaks away from Hannibal, taking several steps back to properly look at him as he roughly slips out of his shoes, probably scuffing them in the process. Hannibal's wet shirt clings against his chest, the undershirt he wore for modesty has been rendered useless now by the saturating rain, indecent nipples on display, salacious lines of muscles, pectorals and obliques outlined while dark trails lead down dangerous paths. Hannibal carelessly toes off his dress shoes, leaving them tossed to the side.

Will wolfishly advances on Hannibal, with his head lowered, blazing eyes intent on Hannibal who waits by the closed door feeling like Will wants to devour him, consume him body and soul. And Hannibal wants it, relishing the sentiment of being the hunted deer for a change.

Hannibal moves forward, tired of waiting to feel Will's body against his. They meet somewhere in the middle, like air currents colliding together to make thunder when epiphany strikes Hannibal. All this time he's been falsely worried about storms of silence and misunderstandings separating them. When they've been the storm all along that the world should fear.

There is a hunger to Will as his hands reach around and fumble to untuck Hannibal's shirt from his dress pants. His hands linger for a moment atop the crest of Hannibal's glutes. His finger traces a line across the hard muscles, featherlight. The suggestion jolts Hannibal's hips forward. Hannibal stills for a moment, breathing heavy with anticipation before Will moves his hands up the broad expanse of Hannibal's back, groping palmfuls of flesh.

Hannibal holds the sides of Will's face as he takes his time slowly kissing him, wanting to make these moments last. No reason to rush through what has occupied his thoughts for these last few weeks, what he's been thinking about doing with Will, to Will. Hannibal presses his lips against Will's closed mouth before readjusting to focus on Will's kiss swollen bottom lip, sucking it lightly to pull the flesh into his mouth. His teeth graze gently before sharply biting down. It sends a pulse through Will's body from his heated core up to his throat and out his mouth. Hannibal greedily swallows it down for himself. Will runs his hands up and down Hannibal's strong back, grabbing a fist full of hair and tugging his head back. Will kisses his exposed neck, tonguing his throbbing pulse. Will brings his other hand up to grab Hannibal's jaw, pulling his head down. Their lips meet again, Hannibal traces the line of Will's top lip with his tongue. Will slightly parts his mouth to allow Hannibal access.

Their tongues shyly touch before pulling away. Will shifts a little on his feet, his throbbing erection rubbing against Hannibal's, shocking both men into breathy moans in the hushed room. Their clothes feel heavy and cold against their flushed skin.

Their foreheads lean against each other as Hannibal's hands deftly reach down between them, finding Will's belt, tugging and pulling it apart in such a way that Will feels like he's the one being undone. It's when the zipper opens that Will starts to tremble. His pants are pushed down his thighs by two sets of hands. The cold air prickles his skin. He steps out of his pants, feeling as if he's leaving his skin behind.

Feet rooted to the ground on sturdy legs with muscles no longer burning from the weight of standing, knees alternating between locked and quaking, not quite feeling connected to their bodies anymore. An airy weightlessness settles in as they grope and cling to each other's bodies to keep from free falling into this uncharted space. Hannibal glides his smooth palms down the outside of Will's thighs, when skin against skin contact is made Will shudders. Hannibal continues kissing Will, alternating between light pressure of his lips and licking into Will's parted mouth. Hannibal shifts his attentions to trail kisses below Will's ear, to the side of his neck, to the base of his throat, all the while bending his knees. As he kneels in supplication, lifting Will's shirt to kiss his hip bone, Will takes this time to breathe. Hannibal swallows thickly, looking up in idolation through his lashes with his hands gripping Will's dense thighs, waiting for instruction.

"I think I should go," Will says.

"This is your room," Hannibal replies.

Will huffs a laugh. "Then you should go."

Hannibal releases Will from his grasp but he doesn't stand.

"If that is what you want."

"Yeah. Maybe? I don't know. I just know this is happening too fast and I need to think."

“Of all the times, you choose now to think instead of allowing emotion to guide you,” Hannibal teases.

Will clenches his hands. “I’m not good at this.”

“Have you heard the one about practice?”

Will rolls his eyes. “Not that. People. Relationships. I’ve been told that I’m too much or sometimes not enough. I’m clingy and jealous and possessive but I want space and quiet and privacy.”

“Human beings are complicated creatures, Will. I expect nothing less from you.”

Will creases his brow. “Am I some sort of professional curiosity? A puzzle for you to untangle and publish an article about?” He takes several steps back.

Hannibal slowly rises. “Of course, I have a professional curiosity about you. But I would never publish anything without your consent, and it would be abstracted in such a way it would never find its way back to you.”

“Thank you for clearing that up for me.” Will stares straight ahead at the door behind Hannibal.

But Hannibal isn’t as easily persuaded this time to leave at Will’s sullen command. He isn’t going to let Will push him away, not again.

“But this isn’t about my curiosity, professional or otherwise. This is about you being a liar and a coward.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Will’s legs tense with the urge to spring forward so that he can grab Hannibal by his shirt collar. But he’s undecided whether he wants to kiss him or kill him.

“Jack Crawford warned me about you and your manipulations. You lie to yourself about your own feelings but turn the brunt of the blame onto others. You lied back in the bar when you couldn’t replicate a German accent, knowing full well that I’m from Lithuania, but that’s a strange accent to the average person, so replicating it would raise suspicion. We both know you can mirror anyone’s speech patterns and accents, I noticed it when I first met you. You try not to do it because it makes people uncomfortable. Echopraxia. But you already know that. In fact, you’re an eideteker, perhaps even rivaling my ability. Those leaps and assumptions that fascinate and confound everyone else are the result of you pouring over everything you’ve ever read in your memory warehouse to find connections. The pattern of things.”

“I already told you not to psychoanalyze me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Only having conversations.”

“You’re a liar too. You said you killed those people that burned down your castle.”

“I most certainly did.”

“So, you’re telling me that you killed what, three people,” Will pauses for correction.

“Eight.”

Will scoffs. “You killed eight people when you were sixteen.”

“I was closer to twenty when I found them. After my family died, I lived in the woods for three years. Never speaking.”

“Why are you telling me this? To intimidate me?”

“I’m merely showing you options.”

“Options? You can’t kill people and get away with it. That’s my job.”

Hannibal raises a brow.

Will throws his hands up. “You know what I meant!”

“I didn’t get away with it. I was arrested. But the people rioted in the streets for my release. Justice had already been served without the court. I found myself suddenly very thankful for the antiquated ways of my home.”

“Well, this isn’t your home, Hannibal,” Will says.

Hannibal tilts his head. “Isn’t it?”

Will’s breath catches. Time starts again, racing ahead with the world crashing around them. A car horn blares outside in competition with police sirens further up the street. There’s a muffled argument scurrying across the walls. The cold has her icy hands around Will’s thighs and diminishing erection. He suddenly feels embarrassed arguing with his pants pooled near his feet. The soles of his feet tickle from the vibration of his phone. Will looks down in consideration.

“I strongly advise against touching your work phone,” Hannibal says.

Will crouches to rifle through his pants pockets with the smell of mold wafting around him. He finds his personal phone first. There are several check in texts from Lukas with pictures. When Will retrieves his work phone there’s a strong hand gripping his wrist.

“Don’t you dare. We are having a conversation, do not invite Jack Crawford into this room,” Hannibal says.

Will creases his brow and attempts to pull his arm away from Hannibal. But the lithe man is stronger than he looks.

“This isn’t some romantic vacation. We’re in a shitty mold saturated hotel trying to seek distractions in each other while the world carries on with her misery just outside our windows.” Will jerks his arm away. His face goes blank for a moment.

“What is it, Will?”

“He took another. While I was,” he pauses, “here, he took another scared teenaged girl.” Will sits back on his haunches and cradles his head in his hands.

Hannibal’s lip sneers at the idea of sitting on this carpet but he does so anyway to comfort Will. He slides over next to Will and shifts him so that their backs are resting against the bed. Will relaxes into Hannibal’s arms that are still enveloping him, letting himself be held as he comes to a realization. He lifts his head up.

“I will find him. He’s escalating, there’s no way he’s eating them this quickly. Whatever he thought he was accomplishing by doing that doesn’t matter now. He’s going to make a mistake, maybe take her from her dorm room and leave something behind. And when I find him, I’m going to kill him. A bullet for each girl he takes.” Will’s voice isn’t righteous or angry. Certainty carries his words with the resignation of what has to be done.

There's a strange swelling sensation growing in Hannibal's chest, akin to what he feels when he looks at Will or while they were kissing but it's grander than those things. Hannibal has always felt his heartbeat as some faint pitiful thing, barely alive, undeveloped, nearly dead after losing Mischa. But that sentence. That sentence surges through the four chambers of his heart, providing the necessary lifeblood for it to grow and function properly. It swells to fill his chest cavity, becoming even larger than the space within his body. He's never felt this before, not when he killed those men that burned his life. Not even when he ate his sister. He wants to tell Will, to say something, but it's a rare moment that can't be properly described, no matter how many eloquent words Hannibal uses.

Will's body stiffens. "I need to get some work done. Would you mind leaving me alone? Things get a little weird when I try to work these puzzles out and I'd rather not have an audience."

Hannibal slides his embrace away from Will. He stands up and looks down at Will, who's already deep in thought.

"Please remember my earlier advice regarding the ice and ibuprofen," Hannibal says.

Will nods absentmindedly at the noises he hears coming from Hannibal. Hannibal walks to the door, swoops down for his shoes and leaves.

Once back inside his own room, Hannibal leans his head against the surprisingly cool door, an old habit from when he was younger that would always calm him. Hannibal is surprised each time it still has the effect of soothing him. He thought he was past such things. Childish superstitions.

He removes his damp clothes, placing them on the closed lid of the toilet before getting into the shower while wearing rubber flip-flops to prevent his bare feet from touching the slimy bottom of the tub. He casually considers masturbating to take the edge off his mood. But he has other important things to contemplate as opposed to how things could have gone between him and Will. For instance, where to leave Miriam's arm for Jack. The timing of her being found alive if she survived while he was away that is. Hannibal would also like to be present when Will confronts this cannibal abductor. He would also like to set in motion Will killing Brian Zeller. It could be a great bonding experience for them, solidifying Will's trust in someone that helps him hide a dead body.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Will gets a call from Jack which ends his excursion with Hannibal earlier than expected.

Chapter 16

Jack Crawford calls Will for the third time. Instinctively, Will reaches for Zoe to keep her calm but his hand pats the empty space beside him. Will stretches across the expanse of the bed to pick up the phone from the side stand, groaning at the strain in his dehydrated muscles, and looks at the screen to check the time before answering. His bleary eyes dilate to take in the brightness, 6:03am, which means it's only a little after five in D.C. Will's throat clenches. *He took another co-ed and it's your fault, he took another co-ed and it's your fault, he took her,* repeats itself like a chant.

"Yeah, Jack. I'm here." Will sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. His bare feet slide on something glossy, sticking to his warm skin. He peers down. Photos. Crime scene photos and scraps of paper litter the room. He doesn't remember doing that. Hell, he doesn't even remember crawling into bed. He's still wearing his dress shirt from yesterday, parts of it cold and damp leaving deep creases. As well as his boxers dotted with the dried stains of the indiscretions of last night. Will reaches down to peel the grisly photo from his sole. The dim light from the lamp on the bedside stand shines against the photo, censoring it for a moment before Will turns it closer to the dark. It's one of the Ripper's earlier crimes, the one the techs named wound man. Will lets it fall to the floor.

"Finally, you decide to answer your goddamn phone."

Will closes his eyes and wishes for some water. And for Jack to lower his voice.

"Have you checked the news at all yet?"

“No, Jack, I haven't.”

“You know, I have these little alerts set up on my account to keep me informed of breaking news or a development, I'm a busy man, gotta save time somewhere. Looks like I'm going to have to add your name to my list.”

Will tries to swallow the lump in his throat. “I'm not following Jack.” A light knock raps on Will's door.

He gets up from the bed, stepping around the various photos scattered on the floor. He walks slowly to the far side of the room to open his door, trying to see a pattern in the groupings of photos and their accompanying scraps of paper. In the light of day, the musings of a dark mind don’t make much sense. Will opens the door to see Hannibal waiting with a large silver platter topped with three plates and two sets of utensils; a breakfast sandwich with fruit salad and fried potatoes are on two of the plates and assorted breakfast pastries are on another plate in the middle. Hannibal balances this on one hand. In his other hand he holds a cardboard carrier with coffee in flimsy to go cups with paper napkins stuffed beside each of them. It's the most dressed down Will has seen him, in cotton thin red pants with grey stripes and a red v-necked sweater. Will lets his eyes drift downwards to take in the expensive looking burgundy velvet slippers on Hannibal’s feet, some sort of crest is embroidered in gold thread. Will wonders briefly if the thread is real gold before deciding of course it is. Will waves him inside as he flicks on the light switch for the tall lamp in the room. Dim mood lighting seems inappropriate right now, especially given the state of Will’s current dress or lack thereof. Hannibal assesses the dishevelment of Will’s room as well as his clothing. Neither of which shocks him at this point. He makes sure to step lightly, avoiding the clusters of pictures and papers sprawled on the floor.

“Is Dr. Lecter there?”

Will darts his eyes to Hannibal before answering. Hannibal puts the items down on the small desk and nods for Will to say yes. Then Hannibal goes to pull over the wing chair to the desk. Will rolls the office chair closer to himself and sits down.

“He's here.”

“Good. Put me on speaker. Both of you should hear this.”

Will fumbles with the phone for a moment with his sweat slicked palms before placing it on the desk next to the coffee. He quickly picks up a to go cup and takes a gulp before Jack starts to speak, burning his tongue in the process. Hannibal sits down in the wing chair and starts to eat his fruit salad.

"Now I don't know what kind of red neck, white trash, po'dunk family you've got running around barefoot down there. But none of the funerals I've ever been to end in a bar fight with police officers. Don't say a fucking word, neither of you. I'm not done yet. It's not smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living. Sound familiar Special Agent Graham?"

Will drops his head to avoid looking at Hannibal. The ac ticks on, stirring the air around them with a heavy groan and a waft of mold. The coolness pimples Will's skin. He wishes for a hot shower and some sweats. He eyes Hannibal's cozy attire while wondering if that sweater could accommodate two.

"What's that? I can't hear you," Jack says.

"Did Beau sell his story or did Ressler call you?"

"Oh Beau, and Tuck and Ace and whatever the other little shit's name was, sold their stories alright. Right to Lounds. Another article on the unstable Will Graham because Jack Crawford wants to add another tally to his collection of ruined agents. You're becoming quite the feature on that little website. And now my name is associated with this horse shit."

"How did he know I was there?"

"I don't know. That's not important right now."

"No, Jack. It is important. You've got a rat. Any disgruntled employees especially upset with my new assignment of duties?"

Jack thinks, cogs clicking into place.

“Bella is trying to call me. I've got to go. But I'm not done with you two yet. I've been in contact with Dr. Bloom. She's going to be coming down from Georgetown to assist with your teaching duties. And maybe even your baby-sitting duties as well, Dr. Lecter, or would you prefer Atticus Darcy? Since you seem to think it's wise to let Graham run his mouth and throw hands in some shitty dive bar.”

Hannibal blots the corner of his mouth with a brown paper napkin after he takes a bite of the greasy egg biscuit sandwich. He swallows, making Jack wait.

“Will is perfectly capable of handling himself. As for Dr. Bloom, she will be a wonderful addition to our cobbled together team.”

“No, you’re not quite understanding me Doctor. Let me be blunt. This little arrangement of ours is done. Dr. Bloom will now be handling Graham’s mental health. Exclusively.”

Will and Hannibal exchange tense glances.

“I see.” Is all Hannibal manages to say before the call ends.

Jack Crawford stops pacing the already thread worn carpet of his living room with his wooly green socks as he disconnects the call, feeling Bella look up from her knitting with kind eyes in case he wants to vent. Her latest project is a soft grey cardigan for Jack to wear. Something for after she’s gone. The buttons are big wooden affairs that age him almost ten years whenever he tries it on for a fit check. In time, he knows it will be his most cherished possession. He avoids her gaze for the moment, reaching for the room temperature alka seltzer on the tv tray table to down half of it in one long swallow.

“You look like a kettle about ready to explode. Open your mouth and release a little steam.”

Jack sighs. He crosses the room to where Bella is sitting. They always seem to be in the living room these days. The bedroom has the grey-green feel of a hospital ward. Jack kneels in front of Bella to rest his head on her lap, wrapping one arm around the backs of her ankles for support. As his fingertips brush against her skin a static shock discharges between them. Bella laughs buoyantly and some of the weight of his worries are lifted from his shoulders. Her warm smile travels down her fingertips as she caresses her husband's scalp, trying not to notice the spreading patches of grey and white hair. Jack closes his eyes and basks in Bella's sunny affection.

"We should take a vacation. Maybe some little vineyard in Italy," she says.

Jack breathes in the smell of her, still mostly Bella, slightly ill and medicated.

"We can eat figs with bread and prosciutto," he says, enjoying this game that they've been playing for years now.

"Run barefoot through those hardy shrubs, the hot baked soil almost burning our soles."

"I'll catch you. I always do." He turns to look up at her. Her gold headscarf halos her head like a goddess.

"I always let you," she teases.

"Why? I thought you were a good girl?"

She swats his shoulder and leans down to him. "Because how could I kiss you otherwise?" She kisses his cheek and lets her face rest there against his.

Jack's work phone buzzes. Then his personal phone echoes like a horrible game of marco polo. Bella sits up but resumes running her fingertips across her husband's scalp. Jack doesn't go for the phones. He readjusts his numbing legs to keep his head on her lap.

"Just this once. It's okay," she reassures him.

Jack sinks further into her comfort. It feels good to let the reins drop. Soon enough they'll have to learn to handle things without him there guiding them, correcting them like a jockey with a riding crop. Why not give them some practice now? Bella shifts in her seat, reaching for her phone resting on the arm of her chair. Slow saxophone notes punctuate the buzzing of Jack's phones.

"This again?" He asks.

"Shhh, I like it," she replies.

"Dr. Sax Love, what a foolish name," Jack says.

Bella hums along with the song. Jack focuses on her and only her.

Will searches the Tattlecrime website for the latest article about him on his personal phone. Anger holds his breath hostage as he reads the title, "Special Agent Will Graham gets frisky in a bar with an unknown *male partner*." A picture accompanies the headline. It's of Will bending Ardy over the bar, pants so tight they are practically screaming against the pull. At least they didn't rip. Will keeps scrolling. There are lots of pictures. Mostly of Hannibal. He stops scrolling, stuck on a particularly roguish candid shot of the good doctor, hair disheveled over one eye, mouth parted from heavy breaths, shirt slightly untucked. He stares directly at the camera as if he's angry at being interrupted. Will's fury dissipates some, releasing his breath trapped in his lungs. Each officer got a solo picture detailing their injuries. Will closes the page and sets his phone face down on the desk.

"Are you going to lose your license?" Will asks.

Hannibal is disturbingly unbothered as he continues to eat. "I may need to call my lawyer. He can assist the both of us if need be."

"What about Dr. Bloom? Do you know anything about her?"

"I was her mentor for a semester while she worked on her graduate program at Georgetown."

Will's mind blanks for a moment, thinking about all the lurid stories he's heard about mentors and mentees having passionate affairs while working together, blurring boundaries. Something Hannibal seems to enjoy.

"Just how well are you acquainted with Dr. Bloom?"

Hannibal inclines his head. "There's no reason to be jealous of my past."

Will huffs. "Can't you just answer me bluntly for once."

A small smile stretches across Hannibal's face, like a cat lounging in the sun. But the expression is gone in a blink.

"I have not been romantically involved with Dr. Bloom. There were rumors, of course. But there was no merit to them."

Will feels relieved. "Anything I should know before I meet her?"

"She is a stickler for rules, hence there being no romantic follies. No blurred boundaries with her."

Will's stomach clenches. He hates when Hannibal does that, says the words that are in his thoughts as if he can hear them too. But then Will looks down at his breakfast that Hannibal brought him, on a silver platter no less. Even after their bickering last night, Hannibal still is a gentleman. The only thing that's missing is a single rose. Perhaps the kitchen ran out of them. Will tucks into his sandwich while eying a cherry danish to eat next.

"We should try for an earlier flight. I'll make the arrangements shortly."

Will nods in agreement. They continue to eat in stilled silence until Will's phone alerts him to another update from Lukas. Hannibal looks to Will, watching him as he thumbs through the messages and no doubt pictures. He watches Will's eyes become glossy with tears as his chest rises with remorse. Hannibal finds himself responding in a similar way. His eyes become warm with the sting of tears. His chest feels hollow and empty, even when he tries to fill it with more breath. It's uncomfortably wondrous. He clears his throat while swiping the remnants of their meal into the small trashcan.

"We'll make it in time. She'll wait for you, don't worry. I'll give you some privacy," Hannibal says as he stands. He stacks the plates onto the platter with the utensils off to the side.

Will nods his thanks while biting his lower lip to keep the swelling of angst from ripping out of his mouth. His work phone vibrates.

"You should pack and be ready to leave as soon as possible."

"I'll try not to be late this time." The joke falls flat because there's no humor in his eyes.

Hannibal cautiously rests a hand on Will's shoulder, squeezing firmly as to not be misconstrued as sensual; brotherly, doctorly is the feeling he wants to invoke. Will leans his face against the cool hand. A tear runs along Hannibal's fingers, fever hot. He feels scalded. The phone pings again, drowning out Hannibal's intake of breath. Will rights himself and palms the wetness from the side of his face. His head tilts down in concern. Hannibal picks up the platter and takes his leave from the grief clouded room. He places the platter on the floor outside Will's room for housekeeping to pick up when they make their cleaning rounds.

Hannibal eagerly walks back to his room. Once he's alone behind the closed door, he checks his hand, certain to find a reddened mark from the pain he feels from the burn of Will's tears. There are no such marks. That's when Hannibal understands that the wounds are on the inside.

Will hovers over his phone. He appreciates the updates from Lukas with the accompanying pictures. However, the most recent one is troubling, Zoe with her face angled into a wall corner far removed from the rest of the pack with her hip bones jutting out more than usual. Will decides to call Lukas for details as he packs, his nerves needling at the thought of waiting several more hours before he sees her. Will needs to be prepared before he gets home. He has time. Lukas picks up promptly on the second ring.

"Mr. Graham, how are you?"

"I'm fine. How's Zoe?"

"Is Hannibal okay?"

"What? Yes, why wouldn't he be?"

"I saw the pictures from the bar fight. I knew you were trouble. You're going to ruin his reputation."

Will clenches his jaw, wishing dearly to be at home within the same space as Lukas. For punching purposes.

"I assure you it's nothing he can't handle," Will replies.

"There's something wrong with you, Mr. Graham. And when I find out I'm not only going to let Hannibal know. Freddy Lounds pays a hefty sum for any tips regarding you. University is so expensive here in the US."

“That’s great. Will you also let me know what you find out, I’ve been dying to know what my issues are.”

Lukas laughs, something harsh and fake, like a soap opera villain.

“Now that’s out of the way, has Zoe been eating or drinking while I’ve been gone?”

“Not really. I figured she might just miss you or something since nothing else seemed wrong, no vomiting or bloody shits in the house. She has been panting a lot though. I’ve been putting some ice packs near her to keep her cool. The other dogs are fine. They don’t seem to be paying any attention to her.”

The muscles in Will’s chest grip his racing heart. He tilts his head back to keep the tears in his eyes. *My dog is dying and I’m not there to comfort her.*

He clears the emotion from his constricted throat. “Stay close to her, please. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Whatever,” Lukas says before disconnecting the call.

Will stares down at his cell phone, hoping that Lukas doesn’t try to extort money from him. Then again, maybe it’s time to explore his options like Hannibal suggested.

Will collects his notes and pictures from the floor haphazardly, not taking care to stack them in order as he shoves them into folders and then into his work bag, he’ll sort them out later. Will finishes packing and rushes through his hygiene routine, trying desperately to wash the cortisol stink of grief and anxiety from his body and tongue. He pops a mint for good measure. He grimaces at the mix of copper and peppermint flooding his mouth.

Will isn't late this time. In fact, he's out of his room before Hannibal is. If he were in a better mood, it would be fun to gloat about this little development. Will looks down to see the silver platter Hannibal brought their breakfast on. He wonders how he acquired such a thing. Maybe he charmed the wait staff to allow him to use it. Will decides to check his work phone while he waits. There is a string of texts and emails from Jack and the team working on the abductor case. The last text from Jack is in all caps demanding Will to be at the lab tomorrow morning. Will sighs as he slides his phone back into his pocket. Hannibal finally emerges, dressed in another stylish three-piece suit from his room with his bags and saunters up the hall to Will.

"Shall we?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods his consent with a thin-lipped smile as they enter the elevator. Hannibal anticipates that it is going to be a quiet ride to the airport.

They check out at the front desk, passing their keycards to someone who isn't Brianna and leave the hotel. They load up the rental car before driving to the airport. Hannibal acknowledges Will's desire to be left alone during these current circumstances. Even if he aches to soothe Will with his touch. Silence feels appropriate for the drive; Hannibal leaves the music off.

Despair seems to dampen Will's anxieties about over-lit crowded spaces. He trudges along with heavy steps. Frustration itches Hannibal's soles at walking this slow. He briefly entertains the idea of hoisting Will over one shoulder and sprinting to their departure gate to make up for lost time. The idea amuses him. Will turns to look at him.

"What are you smirking about?"

"Oh, the places we'll go, Will," Hannibal says in a sing-songy voice.

Will creases his brow.

"If only you'd fucking walk a little faster."

Will's mouth drops open.

"I don't think I've ever heard you swear before," Will gasps.

"Then hopefully I made my point for you to pick up the pace."

Will grins a little and starts walking with more gusto. They arrive at their departure gate at a rate Hannibal deems acceptable. They scan the available seats, choosing a pair that are separated from the masses. Will barely relaxes into his plastic seat before his phone blares out. He hurriedly fishes for his phone deep in his pocket. He doesn't even need to check the screen before answering.

"Jack, I can't talk now, we're boarding the flight."

"I don't need you to talk, just listen. He took another. That's five gone. I just wanted you to know that." Jack hangs up abruptly.

Will exhales a shaky breath. "Anything else. Anything fucking else."

Hannibal places a reassuring hand just above Will's knee and squeezes.

"You'll catch him."

"I'm stuck on how I'm supposed to do that. I've got the vaguest outlines of a man, but you can't catch a shadow. He's going to keep killing them until he makes a mistake that I can see. How many girls have to die for me to see it?" Will slouches down in his seat to lean his head back against the hard molded top.

Hannibal's hand inadvertently slides higher up Will's leg, now resting in midthigh territory.

"Let's discuss it. Were you able to find any new connections last night?"

"Here?" Will scoffs.

"We'll keep our voices low. Everyone seems to be preoccupied with their own troubles."

Will crosses his arms protectively over his chest. He inhales deeply. "Alright. The basics. White male. Most likely in his forties. From Minnesota." Will pauses.

Hannibal pats his thigh to urge him on before removing his hand from Will's leg.

"Now comes the speculation."

"Not speculation. You can see patterns in behavior that others ignore, almost like sacred geometry in nature."

"Nothing this man is doing is sacred."

"Maybe not by common standards. Death one is one of the more natural and honest acts humans are capable of. Besides sex."

Blood bristles the back of Will's neck with the heat from Hannibal's words.

"Is cannibalism included in that list too?"

Intrigue tilts Hannibal's head like a dog taking in a new sound.

"I know, I know, I'm still fixated on that," Will says.

"Five healthy young women is a lot of meat in a short span of time to consume. Maybe he has an accomplice?"

"Or a big freezer."

Hannibal smirks. "Don't worry. Jack will come around to your theory."

"That one and the one about the Ripper?"

Without a hitch, Hannibal says, "Most likely when it is too late to deny otherwise."

Will leans in closer to his co-conspirator. "It just didn't make sense to me that he's keeping surgical trophies on a shelf somewhere. I think he's eating them like the pigs that they are. But that's not all," he lowers his voice even further, forcing Hannibal to close the distance between them, "I think he's bored with Miriam Lass, that he's found someone else to torment and obsess over. She's going to show up somewhere. It's only a matter of time."

"I imagine Jack wasn't too fond of that assertion."

Will readjusts in his seat and exhales loudly. "He asked if I've been getting enough sleep and then mentioned something about working myself to death. But I could tell that I spooked him."

"There are six documented types of cannibalism, endo typically due to grief, exo as a means for power, starvation driven, gastronomic enjoyment, medicinal remedies and

sadistic. Which kind do you think your cannibals are?"

Will shakes his head. "It isn't that simple, to just label people's actions and place them into tidy boxes. There's fluidity to everything."

"Very true. Even ideas can ebb and flow, melding into each other. Are you sure that isn't what you're doing?" Hannibal asks.

"Good question." Will huffs a little laugh. "With the Ripper there is actual evidence, sweet breads missing. It's the same with the daisy and candy case which aligns with my assumption that it's the Ripper. So far with this abductor there is no evidence. Almost as if he's licked his plate clean. I just felt that they are connected somehow, either they know each other, or they are similar in their proclivities."

"Do you think they have the same motivations for their consumption?"

"No. The Ripper loves an audience. There's art to what he does. I imagine he savors the meals he makes from them. This other guy," Will pauses and shakes his head, "he might have a daughter. Maybe she's leaving for university and he can't bear the thought of her leaving him. He finds girls that look like her and eats them so that he'll have a part of her inside him."

"But that feeling doesn't last long," Hannibal adds.

"It doesn't because it's like eating imitation crab meat when the real thing is within reach. Sure, it'll quell that hunger. But not the need."

"Then his daughter is in danger," Hannibal says.

Will leans forward, propping his elbows on thighs to rest his chin in his hands. "That's why he's escalating so suddenly. Maybe she knows what he's doing and she's

scared. He doesn't like how she looks at him now, like she can't wait to move away from him."

"Classes have already started," Hannibal says.

"I know," Will sighs as he hangs his head to run his hands through his hair. "Maybe she's enrolled for the second semester and is packing up her things, making him realize that once she leaves, she is never coming back to him."

"How is he gaining access to these young women?"

Will straightens up and leans back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. His hand roughened hair sticks out at odd angles. "He could be part of an admissions board or scholarship foundation reviewing applications. Or maybe he's a contractor that gets hired out to different colleges to do work there," Will pauses to swallow dryly. "The next one will be taken from her dorm room. He'll leave something behind, some trace evidence for Bev to find," his voice is even with his assertion.

"These are all very good theories, Will," Hannibal says.

"No one else seems to think so. He's going to want me there, you know, in Minnesota. I wish you could go with me."

"But then who would tend to your collected strays?" A mischievous twinkle gleams in his eyes.

"What about Lukas?"

"I think after the discussion that he and I are going to have he will no longer wish to be of service to me."

Will huffs. “He told me that I’m going to ruin your reputation. That I’m trouble for you.”

“How did you reply?” The smallest beat of wings in Hannibal’s chest flutter. Panic.

“I assured him it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

The panicked flutter in Hannibal’s chest surges outwards, inflaming his heart with the orange embers of promise.

Oh, the places you will take me, Will Graham. With my hand firmly in yours we can conquer the world.

Hannibal smiles at Will with the overhead lights catching his eyes just so they flare red as if he were a creature of the night. The sight causes Will’s breath to hitch.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will return to Virginia and must make a decision about Zoe's well being. In true Will fashion, he goes to a bar to let off some steam when he encounters an unexpected co worker.

Chapter Notes

tw/cw graphic depiction of the euthanasia of dear Zoe (*please take care of yourself first and skip whatever you deem necessary.) Implied assault between Will and Matthew Brown.

french- amuse-gueule = savory appetizer, literal translation is amuse mouth

Chapter 17

Hannibal tolerates Will’s sullen silence throughout the three-hour plane ride. He even tolerates Will’s brooding during the half-hour car ride. But what is really testing his resolve is the way Will won’t stop fidgeting, whether it’s rolling his shoulders or tapping his fingers impatiently on his shaking knee, Will remains in constant flux. Will controlled his twitching while in public but here in the privacy of Hannibal’s car he seems to be making up for lost time. Hannibal clenches his jaw and swallows down the biting words nipping inside his mouth. He doesn’t want to snap at Will. Not under these circumstances. Maybe later this evening he could offer Will a massage to assuage those tense muscles. Perhaps after a glass or two of wine. Nothing too fancy, something from the second shelf at the grocery store would be adequate. He wonders if Will prefers red or white. Perchance something pink, a delicate balance of both. Hannibal indulges in this scenario for the duration of the car ride to Will’s home as a pleasant distraction to keep from pulling the car over and doing something rash.

Hannibal parks his sleek car next to Lukas’s rusty sedan. The contrast is an obscene lesson in capitalism. As they exit Hannibal’s car Will notices the duct tape affixing the driver’s side mirror to Lukas’s car door. He doesn’t exactly revel in this fact, but he does delight in it. Will goes to reclaim his luggage from the backseat when a soft hand on his elbow stops him. Will didn’t even hear Hannibal approach him from behind which is peculiar given how the noisy gravel tends to announce even the smallest of movements.

“Please, allow me,” Hannibal says.

Will inches closer to the open car door boxing them together since Hannibal may find it offensive if Will were to move around him to stand outside the door’s breadth. Will casually drapes an arm over the car door for balance to allow Hannibal access to the backseat. Hannibal’s shoulder brushes against Will’s chest as his thigh grazes Will’s crotch since neither one is capable of surrendering space for the other. Will’s body tingles in response to even the lightest of touches from Hannibal. Will admires Hannibal from behind as he hefts Will’s bags out of the car as if their weight were of no consequence to him. Hannibal rights himself with the bags on his left side so that there are no obstacles between him and Will. They stand a mere movement away from kissing distance for a heavy heartbeat which Will feels under his fingernails.

“After you,” Hannibal says.

Will moves forward, sliding his right arm across the top of the car door while his other hand intentionally strokes the front of Hannibal’s trousers causing his member to liven up with blood. Hannibal inhales deeply, luxuriating in Will’s touch.

They approach the house slowly, Will taking his time so that his half hard erection will subside and to prepare himself for what awaits him. He wonders how Lukas will treat him. Probably as polite as pie as long as Hannibal is around. Will opens the door and steps inside.

The dogs flood around Will while Hannibal sets Will’s luggage down and out of the way. Their usual chaos dialed up to eleven, barking and jumping, snapping at each other for space. Zoe edges outside of the melee, panting while waiting for her pets patiently. Will sees her and knows that he’ll have to make a difficult decision sooner than later. He always dreads these moments. He looks to Hannibal for reassurance, passing his grief to him like a cloched plate. Hannibal immediately receives it and takes the lead.

“Thank you, Lukas, you may go now. I will follow up with you later,” Hannibal commands.

Will didn’t even notice Lukas sitting so prim on the couch with his items neatly surrounding him. Quite the difference from the lounging pose he had the last time Will saw him on his couch. Lukas doesn’t protest. He simply gathers his things and stands. He doesn’t look at Will nor does he bid the dogs goodbye. He just leaves. He only looks back at Hannibal once he’s safely outside. He stands awkwardly with his bags slung on his shoulders staring at Hannibal through the screen door. Hannibal nods dismissively at Lukas and his low-slung ripped jeans.

Will hears a car door slam and an engine rev, no doubt spewing gravel as the tires speedily spin, as he kneels to be closer to Zoe, swallowing back sorrow that gushes into his mouth like brackish river water.

“Will?” Hannibal asks tenderly.

He nods, knowing that his voice will betray the current of his emotions.

“May I evaluate Zoe? It will be brief and cause her no harm.”

Will nods again. He stays crouched while Hannibal scoops Zoe up, taking her into the bathroom.

“Will?” He calls after several minutes.

“Yeah?” Will coughs out, still crouching on the floor with numb legs.

“Mind joining me for a discussion?”

Will clenches his fists and his jaw. He gets up and goes to the bathroom to find Hannibal sitting on the closed toilet with Zoe in his lap. It would be comical if it were any other day but today.

“Her scales are delicately balanced between contentment and pain. Now would be the best time to let her go, before things tip.”

A flutter of panic takes flight in Will’s chest, sending his heart into a rapid beat. It pulses with raw words, abandonment, failure, betrayal.

“I can’t wait another day? Have her for the night?”

Hannibal looks down at the lounging dog in his lap. He shakes his head.

“Best not to risk it,” he says.

Will releases a shaky breath. “Okay, I’ll call the vet and make an appointment.”

“I can do it,” Hannibal says.

Will creases his brow.

“I have sedatives and syringes. She would be more comfortable here at home surrounded by warmth and love.”

“I, umm. Thank you,” Will says, profoundly grateful for Hannibal.

“I have a few things to tend to. Which will give you some quality time with her. I should be back in three hours or so.”

Will gulps down the drowning feeling again.

“Don’t worry. I won’t rush in here to take her from you. You’ll have plenty of time to feel ready.”

Will scoffs. “I’m never ready.”

“You’ve never done this with me.”

Will takes out his phone to check the time. “How about five hours?”

Hannibal rises with Zoe cradled in his arms. “That actually works better for me.”

Will forces his mouth into a small sad smile before he turns away from Hannibal to make his way back to the living room. Hannibal follows, still carrying Zoe. He places her down on the couch and looks to Will who is petting Winston on the head as he sits on Will’s feet. They’re watching Hannibal. In fact, all of them are watching Hannibal. Even Luna who has been uncharacteristically keeping her distance from Hannibal. Unease runs her spindly fingers down Hannibal’s back. He doesn’t know what is expected of him in this moment. Hannibal takes the few short steps to Will and places a kind hand on his muscle contracted shoulder. He squeezes, feeling a crunch similar to gravel under his grasp. Will winces.

“Would you like me to bring anything when I return?”

“A time machine,” Will says. His face has gone pale.

“I’m still working on that as of now,” Hannibal replies.

“Oh?” Will quirks up a brow, momentarily surprised but then not at all that Hannibal would be dabbling with quantum equations.

“I could prepare a light dinner.”

Will frowns as he shakes his head, moving out from under Hannibal’s oppressive hold.

“I’ll be lucky if I don’t throw up. I usually lose my appetite for a few days after.”

“Another time then,” Hannibal says. He lets his hand fall to his side.

The magic between them has dulled for the time being. Their passionate evening feels lightyears away as opposed to the thousand miles and one day ago. This shift confounds Hannibal who begins walking to the door with reluctant steps. That same feeling of something tugging in his chest happens again, just like in the lab several days ago. He is bound to Will, drawn to him by some tightly plucked invisible string coiled around his heart. It’s a longing he hasn’t felt in a while. And he’ll be damned if he lets it wither away.

He doesn’t turn to Will before he exits. There’s a welling in his eyes that would betray his needs. Make him vulnerable. And he doesn’t have time for such things. Instead, he quietly walks to his car, alone, pondering the queer situation he has found himself in.

Hannibal leaves the music off as he drives home first to unpack and shower. The confinement of the airplane has left an unsavory grim coating his skin. He walks through his house with a meandering gait as if he’s touring a museum, touching objects that he missed while he was away, the frame of his favorite painting of Leda and the Swan, the katana his Aunt honored him with after he killed those men that butchered his family, a flannel stolen from one of Will’s open boxes in his room upstairs. The smell of him is muted now, but still lingers faintly between the soft cotton threads.

He walks unhurriedly to the kitchen, stepping into the pantry. He closes the door behind him as he steps to the side of a hidden door in the floor just in front of the refrigerator.

Hannibal kneels and presses his palm against the wood for the mechanism to disengage. The door pops open a few inches, only enough for him to pry his slim fingertips under to lift the door the rest of the way up. Lights flicker on as he descends the stairs to the cellar.

Hannibal saunters, taking his time strolling the vast underground of his home, perusing shelves with various medical curiosities, an embalmed fetus with its spine exposed, an uncircumcised penis with a malformed shaft resulting in two tips. Everything is gleaming and cold. Clean. He makes his way back to the furthest wall where a large industrial refrigerator stands, past the various sausages hanging from wooden beams to dry age. Hannibal opens the freezer side to pluck Miriam's vacuum-packed arm from its frozen depths. Her fingers still retain their dainty loveliness even with the rigidity of rigor. He puts her arm in one of the sinks to thaw a little as he makes his way back upstairs. This next part may be difficult.

Will doesn't bother unpacking, that would be a waste of the time he has left. Instead, he puts on a CD he found upstairs when he first moved in. The light piano music soothed Zoe's anxieties like a charm. He lets the rest of the dogs outside to expel some of their energy while Zoe watches with her nose pressed against the screen door. She barks encouragement occasionally during the game of chase Jack and Max have initiated. Meanwhile, Will hurries to the laundry room to retrieve her favorite yellow blanket from the stack on the shelf against the wall. On his way back to the living room he checks the various water bowl levels for refilling. Then Will arranges the blanket on the couch into a nest for Zoe to nestle into once she's ready. He lets the dogs in, watching how cautious they are around Zoe. Everyone settles in as Will places Zoe into her blanket nest. She fusses for a few moments before resting her head on Will's arm with a long sigh.

He looks into her eyes, dulled by looming death. Her cheeks sunken so that the zygomatic bones are the most prominent feature of her face. There's a smell, a distinctly animal smell that repulses him. Reminding him that his own morality repulses him.

Hannibal turns off the flashlight and lowers a bucket with supplies into the well. She'll be thankful for the water and food, even though it's highly processed junk. Hopefully, she isn't too far gone to figure out how to open them with one hand. Hannibal knows Miriam will resent him for the rag and the bucket when it comes time to use them.

She doesn't call out to him. She doesn't stir from her place on the floor. Miriam only watches him with black leaden eyes. He leaves quickly. Annoyed with all the effort that he put into his appearance when it seemed to go unnoticed by her. He even had a few sound bites of Jack at the ready if she tried to speak to him. Alas, she seemed resigned to her situation. Hannibal hopes her spirit hasn't dissipated so quickly like mist under the sun's blaze. He thought she was forged of stronger stuff. Hannibal drives back to his home to prepare himself for his evening with Will. Yet another shower and outfit change. Those charcoal grey linen pants with the mahogany brown cashmere sweater would be a smart casual choice. Will seemed entranced the last time Hannibal wore more casual attire. Hannibal could use this to his advantage. He mentally begins packing an overnight bag just in case, pressing on the gas pedal with a little extra force.

The knock is soft, barely heard over the snoring dogs since the music ended hours ago. Will furrows his brow and groans as he stretches some. He nudges the discarded book under

his hand to the floor. Will tried to read but ended up losing interest to fawn over Zoe. He spoke quietly to her, reminding her of some of their past adventures. He would fall in and out of sleep, waking whenever she shifted for a more comfortable position. Which is happening more frequently. Buster perks his ears up and Luna rushes to the door.

Will pulls back the curtain to wave Hannibal inside since he left the door unlocked for him. It's the black bag that Will fixates on which Hannibal carries so lightly. How is it possible that the dominion over death fits into such a small, unassuming bag? It should be burdensome, taking both hands to drag its gargantuan responsibilities from here to there as the worn handles bite fresh blisters into your palms, licking away the blood as nourishment for the weary fabric. You should be able to hear the struggle of it coming for you from a mile away to allow you the choice to stay or evade the inevitable end. That puny bag feels like a pinching insult to the soft underside of his forearm. A pinprick. Will looks away.

Hannibal greets Luna and Jack who are among the few dogs that are brave enough to come to him. He places his bag on the floor next to the coffee table in front of the couch before he goes to the kitchen. He retrieves two glasses from the drying rack to fill them with cool water from the tap. Hannibal returns to the living room with the glasses and places them on the table. He sees that Will already has two boxes of tissues and a trash can nearby.

Hannibal elegantly folds himself downward to sit on the floor with his back resting against a ratty recliner. He reaches into the black bag causing Will to hold his breath until a slim book is produced. Hannibal opens the book and begins to read.

They sit in silence in each other's company for a while with the occasional rustling of a page turning as the only marker of time passing. Until Zoe starts to breathe shallowly. Her back legs tense and then start to spasm. Will gives her space and rests a light hand on her head once the spasm is over. Hannibal raises his eyes from his book to Will in question. Will nods to him without making eye contact.

"May I recommend moving her to the floor? Perhaps you have some spare towels?" Hannibal closes the book and places it next to his black bag.

Will doesn't respond.

"Tell me where they are," Hannibal says.

"Laundry room. On the shelf. Take as many as you need."

Hannibal rises without a sound. He slows his usual determined pace, practically loitering through Will's home. Once he's in the laundry room he sorts through the towels choosing the softest among them. Three should do given her size. Even if she were to evacuate both her bladder and her bowels the mess should only equate less than forty ounces. Hannibal strolls back to the living room and lays the towels onto one of the vacant medium sized dog beds.

Will scoops Zoe up carefully so that she isn't jostled, keeping her on her side. He gently places her down on the bed and it feels like a sacrificial offering. Will slumps onto the floor so that he is laying down next to her, propped up on an elbow. Zoe inches her body to rest along his. Hannibal reaches forward and pats her head mostly to check for her response.

Minimal. She only has enough livelihood for Will. Hannibal leans back against the recliner and waits. They once again sit in silence for a span of time which Will loses track of. If he were to ask Hannibal the precise amount would be seventeen minutes and twenty-one seconds.

Will nods. He strokes and murmurs sweet nothings into Zoe's ear while Hannibal takes items out of the black bag and places them onto the table. A pair of scissors, an electric shaver, a small stack of cotton pads, a travel bottle of clear liquid, a thick albeit small red plastic bag, a pair of gloves, a stethoscope and lastly two prepared syringes each with different colored liquids. He considers the scissors and electric shaver ultimately deciding to place them back into the bag.

"Normally I would shave her leg but I'm afraid the noise would cause a disturbance." Hannibal feels Zoe's back leg, searching for a suitable vein. "Her hair is even too short for my scissors. No matter. She's hydrated enough." A thick vein pulses under Hannibal's firm hand.

Hannibal pulls the gloves on then he uncaps the travel bottle to pour a squirt of the liquid onto a cotton pad. The burn of rubbing alcohol tinges the air. Hannibal sterilizes the area as best as he can before tossing the used pad into the red bag. He uncaps the syringe with the opaque liquid.

"This is a sedative to keep her calm and sleepy." He watches for Will's nod before injecting her.

Will pulls a long breath into his lungs as he lays down fully on the floor. He kisses the top of Zoe's head. Will brings Zoe closer into his body and nods.

"She might feel this. Just a prick and then a sting. Nothing worse than getting blood taken."

Zoe doesn't react to the needle. Hannibal takes another cotton pad to dab away the ruby of blood left behind. He caps the used syringe and places it with the bloodied pad into the red bag. He checks her heartbeat with the stethoscope to ensure that the correct dosage was used. Hannibal removes the stethoscope, satisfied with his work.

By Hannibal's calculations this is the shortest span of time Will waits before nodding for Hannibal to continue, only eleven minutes. He prepares the last syringe which is filled with a milky pink substance.

"A cannula would have been preferred but she may have bled more than you would have liked to see. Also, given her low percentage of fat it may have been uncomfortable for little Zoe." Hannibal pauses, eager for Will to look at him.

Will lifts his head from Zoe, turning his gaze slightly to Hannibal.

"This will be quick, Will. Less than five minutes for the pentobarbital to stop her heart. She will be able to hear you until the very last second. She'll depart with the echoes of your love in her ears."

Hannibal watches Will's face contort into a mask of pain. It's unlike anything he's ever seen before. So different from the narcissistic shrouds worn by the ones he's transformed. Will lowers his face to Zoe's neck, alternating between kissing her head and telling her what a good girl she is and how much he loves her and that she can rest now. The display of pure empathy is thrilling to Hannibal, causing his head to feel heady as if he drank alcohol too quickly on an empty stomach. With rapt attention Hannibal waits for a signal to continue from Will. A quick nod, almost imperceivable. Hannibal slides the needle into her faintly pulsing vein, pressing the plunger down to flood her body with the overdose that will kill her.

Will cradles her body as it goes limp against him. Sobs rack his body into near convulsions. He doesn't let go of her until she feels cold, careful to not jostle the body as he moves away and sits up. Will grabs several tissues to tend to his face. He sits still, staring blankly into space. Hannibal recaps the syringe before putting it into the red bag. Next, he puts on the stethoscope one last time to check for a heartbeat. Nothing. Once again, his ratios were correct. He silently congratulates himself on his fine work as he ungloves and tosses them into the red bag. He gathers the items from the table and repacks them into his black bag.

"How else may I be of assistance?"

Will clears his throat. He reaches for the glass of water on the table and takes a sip, buying time before answering. He knows exactly what will distract him from this bone hollow pain; three shots of whiskey and being fucking mercilessly until his brain whites out and he falls into a dreamless sleep. But that kind of behavior lacks decorum. And even dressed down in his sweater and pants, Hannibal still radiates decorum. If Will wants to pursue anything with Hannibal he is going to have to learn to behave himself. No more bars. No more following men home. No more masturbating while imagining himself dripping in blood.

"I can handle the rest on my own. Thank you, Dr. Lecter."

The frown on Hannibal's face is minute and quickly veiled by that inscrutable look he tends to favor. Hannibal stands and collects his bag. He takes a few steps to the door when he pauses and turns back to face Will with his head inclined as his gaze drifts over Will, searching for the meaning in this change in demeanor. He did as Will asked, he did what was needed. But now Will is dismissing him with such a resentful tone of voice. How dare this rude boy use him so cruelly.

Will squirms under the direct light of his attention. He sighs.

"I don't want you to go. I just need you to."

"I won't lie to you and say that I understand," Hannibal says.

Will shakes his head and looks down at his lap. "I have some unhealthy coping mechanisms that I don't want to involve you in."

"I specialize in such matters myself."

Will scoffs. “Having two glasses of expensive Japanese bourbon in front of the fire while Bach plays isn’t the same.”

“What are you ashamed of, Will?”

Will flicks his eyes up to Hannibal. There is a mischievous glimmer cast across his strange maroon eyes.

“Maybe it’s better if I show you,” Will says. He gets up slowly, uncertain of the nausea roiling in the pit of his stomach, as he walks over to where Hannibal stands.

His eyes scan Hannibal’s face, quickly analyzing the subtle ques of arousal; the dilated pupils, the half open mouth expelling breaths in a near pant, the warmed body temperature pushing out sweat from his pores to mingle with whatever earthy lotion and cologne rests on his skin. Will smirks as he looks up at Hannibal through his lashes. He raises his hand to Hannibal’s throat, wrapping his fingers around the unyielding muscle, squeezing with just enough pressure that Hannibal’s eyes glaze over with lustrous desire. Will takes another step forward, pressing his body against Hannibal’s firm stature. Will shifts his hips, tactfully grinding ever so slightly against Hannibal’s budding erection. Will places his other hand at the back of Hannibal’s head to roughly pull Hannibal forward for a deep kiss. Lips slot together and tongues move in a sensual design as if they’ve been doing this for years. It feels like music to Hannibal.

Will focuses on Hannibal’s responses, the little breathy moans almost trapped in his throat by Will’s grasp, the way his hips twitch forward on their own accord seeking more pressure. His eyes close as he breathes in Will’s fevered heat. He hasn’t touched Will yet, his hands rest at his sides with fists clenching and unclenching uselessly, at some point he dropped the black bag which now lays on its side on the floor. Will removes his hand entangled in Hannibal’s hair to settle upon one of Hannibal’s currently clenched fists. Will guides Hannibal’s hand to his throbbing erection.

Hannibal’s eyes flash open as Will moves his mouth to rest against the hot, tender flesh of his throat. Will’s warm breath flutters delicately as his lips move, reverberating throughout Hannibal’s body. This is the most challenging test of restraint Hannibal has ever encountered. Will tilts his mouth up to Hannibal’s ear.

“If you don’t leave, I’ll drink too much and one of us is going to get fucked until their dignity lays crumbled on my floor like a used tissue.”

Hannibal palms at Will’s cock while Will still has hold of Hannibal by his wrist. A gratified sigh escapes from Will into Hannibal’s ear. Hannibal swallows with earnest effort against Will’s unrelenting hold. There might be bruises in the morning. He kneads Will’s heavy member again with concentrated force.

Will pulls back and then removes his hands from Hannibal who has no choice but to put his hand back at his side. Hannibal’s knees weaken at the loss, he almost reaches forward as a desperate clutch for balance.

“I don’t want to corrupt you, Hannibal. I’m trying my best to unlearn my tasteless inclinations,” Will whispers.

“I’m not objecting. In fact, I’m always looking for more ways to broaden my palate.” His voice burns in his abused throat.

“Well for now, savor that amuse-gueule.”

Will looks away from Hannibal back to Zoe’s cooling body on the floor. A few of the dogs have padded over to investigate, respectfully sniffing and nosing her small form. Will rubs his smoldering palms against his pants as he walks away from Hannibal to the kitchen since his throat aches for the sting of whiskey. His knuckles long for the crush of bone but that can’t be addressed with company nearby.

Hannibal bends to retrieve his bag from the floor. He stands for a moment in his haze of confusion and arousal, hesitating on how to proceed. Would an offer of unreciprocated fellatio entice Will to allow him to stay? Hannibal turns and leaves when he hears Will gulp down his whiskey. He walks hastily to the door, not pausing once as he leaves. He continues briskly to his car, hoping to out pace the urge to beg for his needs to be satisfied. In all his reflections, Hannibal never forecast that Will would have this tempest effect on him. Here he sits with clouded mind and racing heart in the quiet of his car. Hannibal allows himself to catch his breath before he begins the long drive home.

Will waits until the whiskey numbs his lightning sharp nerves before going back to the living room and wrapping the yellow blanket more securely around Zoe, tucking one of her favorite toys, a pink mouse, under her chin. He’ll bury her tomorrow in the late afternoon when the ground is soft enough to shovel. Tomorrow. Tomorrow? Will reaches into his pocket for his cell phone to check the date. He huffs a laugh to himself in confirmation. He can’t believe he almost forgot. Will slides his phone back into his pocket. He looks around his home, carefully avoiding that certain pile in the living room. Will paces his house, looking for something to do. He tends to the dogs, letting them out, feeding them dinner and washing out their bowls which distracts him for an hour or so. Will begins to pace again, tidying up here and there. He eyes his unpacked luggage as he pours another whiskey, two fingers worth this time. Will sips the amber colored liquid, considering the laptop tucked inside one of his bags.

“Fuck it,” he announces as he slams the tumbler on the counter to rush over to his bags still waiting patiently by the door.

He lifts his laptop out of a bag and takes it over to the dining table. Will lets it boot up as he goes back for his whiskey. He slugs back another hearty sip and wipes his wet lips with the back of his hand. Will pulls a chair out, scrapping it roughly against the floor and sits down. His leg shakes nervously as he opens a web browser. He even holds his breath as he types the name and location in the search engine.

Matthew Brown Baltimore Maryland.

His resume is the first result. Will hovers his mouse over the link, giving himself the chance to back out now. He clicks instead. Matthew works for a private security firm now,

Grey Hawk Guards. Will leans back in his seat while cradling his tumbler. He takes another sip to finish what was left in the glass.
“Good to know that a restraining order won’t keep you from working with guns again.”

Will chews his bottom lip as the too real memory of the cold steel muzzle of a 45 pressed into the small of his back. He gets up from the table and starts pacing again, circling closer and closer to the door. Will checks his pockets for his phone, wallet and keys before he leaves. He already has a new bar in mind, something a little classier, as a treat as well as a deterrent for his more predatory urges.

This bar is a further drive than the dive bar he went to a few nights back, it’s closer to the city, pricier with a better lit parking lot. Will’s anticipation builds as he gets closer. He’ll just go to the bar and get a drink, that’s all. Maybe some people watching. But definitely no stalking. He’ll stay for a few hours and come home. Will passes the exit he would take for Hannibal’s home, turning his head to keep it in his view for as long as possible. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat as his pants tighten at the thought of visiting Hannibal. Will shakes those naughty thoughts away.

Will finds an empty parking spot between two luxury sport cars. Excitement bubbles in his veins as he walks to the door plastered with best bar awards for the last five years. The bubbles fizzle away to flatness as he hears the telltale whistle of Brian Zeller cut through the din of the crowd. Will spots him immediately at a table with a red-haired woman. She looks up at Will, feeling his gaze instantly, with intelligent fox-like eyes. There’s a calculating quality to her character. She breaks out into a wide, beaming smile as she sees Will, as if he’s exactly the person she’s been anticipating. She nudges Brian and nods her head in Will’s direction. Brian stops whistling instantly and sneers but waves Will over to their table, nonetheless. Will makes his way over to them. He grips the top of the empty chair he’s meant to sit in.

“Will, this is my girlfriend, Erin.” He wraps a protective arm around her.

However, Erin inches forward in her seat, pulling away from Brian.

“I thoroughly enjoyed your paper on how the time of death can be impacted by insect activity.”

“You read my under-grad dissertation?”

Erin nods while she tongues the slim red straw in her drink, luring it into her eager mouth, eyes locked on Will’s all the while. Will narrows his eyes in return.

“She’s really into true crime stuff, aren’t ya babe?”

“Uh huh,” she says, batting her lashes.

“And just what is it that you do, Erin?”

“I’m an interior designer,” she says.

Brian pats her shoulder. “Alright babe, you’ve met him now let him be. See you tomorrow, Graham.”

“You bet,” Will says. He straightens up and looks around the bar before leaving.

“Wait. Don’t be rude, bedbug. We haven’t offered him a drink.” Erin turns her charming attentions to Brian.

Will doesn’t have to see under the table to know where her hand currently resides. The look on Brian’s face is confirmation enough. Brian clears his throat and grins.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say. What are you drinking?”

“Mongoose whiskey, neat.”

Brian creases his brow in question, but he leaves the two of them behind as he goes to buy Will a drink.

“Sit, Will. Please. Make yourself comfortable. We have so much to talk about.” She smiles again with sharp teeth making Will feel as if he’s been baited right into a snare trap.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Will continues his frustrating conversation with Erin. As a treat for himself, he ventures into the woods for a little release. A phone call with Hannibal proves to be rather enlightening.

Chapter Notes

tw/cw for violent images, sexual content, Will being creepy/mildly threatening to Erin, crime statics regarding police brutality against black men, crime statics regarding violent and sexual crimes committed against women

Chapter 18

Will pulls the chair roughly out from under the table. As he sits down under Erin's intent gaze, scrutinizing every movement that he makes, Will realizes in his haste to leave the pallor of his home that he forgot his shield of glasses. It's probably for the best though, considering his glasses are still in a state of disrepair. That coupled with the fading bruise above his brow would make for quite the interesting visage. He makes a mental note to grab another pair of readers at the grocery store next time he's there. Will looks away from her to avoid socializing and appraises the loud crowd.

"It sure is a busy night, isn't it?" She asks.

"Sure is," Will curtly replies.

"Plenty of people to choose from," Erin continues.

This gets Will's attention. He slowly trails his appraising gaze back to Erin.

“Potential victims,” she says.

Will furrows his brow while crossing his arms over his chest. He shakes his head.

“I’m not understanding,” Will says.

She smirks at him with the smug resolve of someone who has the upper hand.

“Do you know how easy it is to follow someone home? Especially after they’ve had a few.”

Will doesn’t react, even though his insides turn to an icy slush.

“Of course, you do.” Her voice like velvet, soft until you go against the grain.

“I think you’ve been watching too many episodes of *Criminal Minds*. The overall statistics of violent crimes has been steadily decreasing each decade. Not to mention that there’s about a fifteen percent chance of being attacked by an unknown assailant. But if you’re scared, Erin, I’m sure that Brian could protect you.”

She shakes her head. “Oh, I’m not scared.”

“Maybe you should be.” Will’s eyes glisten in the dim overhead light as he moves forward in his seat, closer to her.

The same glisten she’s seen numerous times in interview rooms in the basements of prisons. Usually with the added confidence of handcuffs and a burly security guard. All she has in the here and now is a pen taser and bumbling Brian.

“One in three women will experience a violent incident in their lifetime. One in four will experience a violent crime that’s sexual in nature. Seventy-five percent of those crimes are committed by someone she knows. Twenty percent by an intimate partner. So maybe Brian can’t protect you. I don’t know. How’s your sex life?”

Her smile dims a little, nonetheless she continues, “I like statistics too. Here’s a factoid just for you; psychopaths are drawn to certain professions, probably because they align with their nature. The seventh on the top ten list is law enforcement. And considering how you like to punch bar patrons, I’m not surprised. I mean, if I’m being honest, I was a little surprised since police tend to brutalize black men and not other white cops. I’ll throw in another fact for free, police killings have been increasing since the eighties with fifty-five percent of them not being accurately reported.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Avid reader of Tattlecrime I take it?”

She shrugs her shoulders.

“But your partner in crime is missing. I wonder how well you’d fare all by your lonesome?”

“Maybe you should switch to podcasts,” Will says.

And that smile is back, practically beaming. All Will can think is that she’s the cat that caught the canary and that he’s the fucking canary.

“It’s funny you should mention that. I was thinking of starting a podcast myself. Wanna know who my first guest would be?”

Will arches a brow. “Me?”

Erin shakes her head. “No, not first. You’d be second. Right after Matthew Brown.”

Will’s eyes glaze over as his mind fuzzes to white. The noise of the crowd raises to a shrieking level, a particularly piercing cackle stings his eyes.

Brian returns with two drinks. He knocks into Will’s shoulder while putting the whiskey on the table.

“Hey man, that shit was expensive.” He places the other drink, something garishly pink, in front of Erin.

Will catches the micro expression of disgust from Erin before she shifts back into the flirty girlfriend guise, twirling the thin straw before taking a delicate sip. She swallows as if it’s medicine.

I see you. Will thinks.

Will takes a soft sip of the whiskey. Waiting.

Brian scoffs at the silence, indignant. Insecure. He shifts in his seat.

“What? Did I interrupt something? What were you guys talking about?” He snakes a hand over to Erin’s drink to steal a sip.

Will watches her as Brian tries to swallow the cocktail without making a face. There’s an arrogant joy about her eyes as Brian winces.

“Ugh, I’ll never understand how you girls drink that sugary shit. It’s awful.” He frowns while looking wistfully at Will’s tumbler.

Will tilts his still raised glass at Brian.

"No, thanks," Brian says.

Will shrugs as he takes another mouthful.

Erin opens her mouth, but Will swallows quickly to talk over her.

"So, how did you two meet? A detective and an interior designer are certainly an odd couple."

Erin's shoulders raise minutely.

"You'd know a thing or two about odd couples," Brian mumbles while looking down at the table.

Will raises his brows and he can't help but smirk.

"If you're trying to impress your date, you're going to have to speak up so I can properly hear you and respond accordingly." He's startled by how much he sounds like Hannibal.

Will puts his glass down on the table so that both of his hands are free. He clasps them on the table and leans forward a little.

Brian shakes his head and looks away. Erin tuts and rests a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"It is weird that you, a special field consultant, is, umm, involved with, shall we say, his psychiatrist. Odd, even."

Brian shrinks a little under her hand.

"I bet I know exactly how you two met."

Brian finally looks back at Will only to glare at him.

"Well, this should be fun." Erin removes her hand from Brian to swirl her separating drink again.

"Nahh man, I'm good."

"If I'm wrong, I'll buy you a drink. One of these even." Will reaches for his whiskey and takes another satisfying sip.

Brian rolls his eyes and sighs.

"Come on bedbug, it'll be fun." She nudges her shoulder against his.

Another exasperated sigh. "Sure, whatever."

"You first noticed her, I mean with that hair how could you not, four weeks ago at O'Malleys, coincidentally the same week I was loaned out as a special consultant. You, Bev and Price were all enjoying the half-priced pitchers at a table while she was at the bar, alone. You were bemoaning the fact that I was added to the team for the co-ed case. Most likely, in a loud voice, giving away too many details about the case. The following week, she was there again, except this time she bought you a drink, probably wearing something very becoming. Bev and Price took the hint and left so that you two could get to know each other better. And wouldn't you know it, she liked so many of the same things that you did! And

she found your job to be endlessly fascinating. But sometimes she asked a little too intently about me."

"What are you getting at, Graham? That my girlfriend is only using me to get to you? You think," Brian forces a little puff of laughter, "she wants to bang you?"

"You're not asking the right questions. In fact," Will lets a little tumble of a laugh loose, mocking Brian, "I can't think of a single fucking time I've ever heard you ask the right question."

Erin flicks her eyes from Will to Brian and back again, clearly enjoying their interlude.

"You know what, Graham, I think it's time for you to leave."

Will smirks as he takes another mouthful of whiskey, leaving half behind in the glass. He nudges it to Brian.

"At least that wasn't a question." Will gets up from the table. He leans down and lowers his voice. "What you should be questioning is why an interior designer would be hanging around some local dive bar where cops like to go to wind down." Will looks at Brian with raised brows before shrugging and turning away from them.

"It wasn't O'Malley's, shit bird. We met at Holligan's."

"You mean the other dive bar across the street from O'Malley's?" Will turns his head slightly to call out over his shoulder as he leaves.

"And she always looks nice!" Brian yells at Will's back as he exits the bar.

Brian's face twists with anger. He balls a fist to slam down on the table but thinks better of it. Instead, he reaches for the tumbler before him and knocks back the rest of Will's drink.

"Holy shit that's really fucking good," he says breathlessly.

"I can buy the next round if you're short," Erin says.

"Nahh, let's just get out of here."

Erin hastily finishes her drink and goes to stand but Brian stops her.

"Not yet."

Eric sighs and remains seated. "Please don't tell me that my big strong man is afraid of some twitchy little guy?"

Brian slowly turns to Erin, eyes wide in anger. "Of course not. I would fucking wreck him. But even I have to admit that he's good at this profiling stuff. Jack would lose his shit if something happened to Graham that would compromise this investigation. And I'd be riding a desk for the rest of my career."

Erin pouts her lip at him. "We can't have that happen, now can we, bedbug?"

Brian smiles and leans in for a quick kiss. Erin frowns at him while pushing him away.

"That whiskey breath is terrible."

"Ohh, my bad. Give me a mint then."

Erin rolls her eyes. "Not now. Maybe later."

Brian reaches for her drink, but she swats his hand away.

"You've had enough, you're driving. But I could always catch a ride with Will. I wonder if he's still lurking around?" She grabs her purse from under the table and slings the strap on her shoulder.

Brian firmly grasps her other shoulder to keep her in place.

"Very funny," he says.

Erin pulls her shoulder out from his hold.

"What's with you? You're acting so different tonight?"

Erin inhales sharply before forcing herself to relax and lean against Brian's warm body.

"I'm sorry bedbug, I had a rough day with a client today and I'm just impatient."

"Impatient?"

She leans in closer, tilting her mouth to his ear to whisper what exactly she's impatient for.

Brian's jaw falls open. He grabs her hand to pull her from her chair as they briskly leave the bar.

Will sits silently in his car, clenching and unclenching his fists. He's trying to do that square breathing thing Hannibal recommended for stress several sessions ago, but his thoughts keep distracting him.

Will straddles Brian as he lays on the floor in a crumbled heap. He pulls his fist back for another piston like punch, connecting with Brian's nose. Blood spurts out as he coughs against the pain blooming across his face. Brian looks up at Will and smiles with blood between his teeth.

"Is this really how you want me?"

Will shakes his head to clear that thought away, his lap already warm and heavy. He sees Brian practically pulling Erin across the street to his car. He opens the door for her, like a gentleman. Will watches Erin's shoulders tense as she waits for him to get in the car. Once inside with Bon Jovi blaring on the stereo, he pulls out too quickly, tires skidding against the pavement. Will thinks Brian probably does that a lot and that Erin is in for a night of dissatisfaction.

Will drums his fingers against the steering wheel while he considers following them. But they're too boring for it to be worth the risk. Also, Erin seems to know that particular quirk about him and might be extra vigilant during their drive back to Brian's little hovel of a home. But how did she know? Maybe Matthew told her about how they met. The detail that keeps nagging at him is how did an interior designer manage to cross paths with someone like Matthew Brown? Will leans his head against the rest and shuts his eyes. He decides that he doesn't care how they met. It doesn't matter since he'll probably never see either of them again. He exhales slowly.

His lips were dry, little lifts of chapped skin chafing against his own lips. His hands knew immediately where to grab, where to stroke. Will gasps with a quickened heart before pushing him away, further into the dark alleyway. He turns to leave. A hand darts out to grab him by the wrist.

"Wait. Isn't this what you wanted?" His face is hurt, confused. So youthful.

'I've made a mistake." Will tries to gently remove his wrist from Matthew's grasp.

But he only tightens his hold.

"You bet you fucking did." Matthew lets Will's hand drop.

Will abruptly starts his car to cancel out what happens next and the fact that Erin also knows what happens next. Albeit, from Matthew's twisted perspective, nonetheless, someone knows half of the truth and not what's in a file locked in a drawer somewhere in Jack's office. Will decides on what he has to do. He can't go home. Not when he's feeling this way. Especially with what awaits him there and the long day ahead of him tomorrow at work. No. What he needs now is the still darkness of the woods. A little shimmer from the moon against his bare skin. Perhaps a cool dip in the river. Will takes a left instead of right, making his journey a little longer but it's worth not being behind Brian's car on his way to the junkyard where he found Zoe. He leans over to open his dash, hand blindly riffling through the strewn contents until he lands on what he's looking for. He slides the old cassette tape in and welcomes the acid rasp of John Fogerty's stalking cadence singing, "When the sky is gray and the moon is hate. I'll be down to get you. Roots of earth will shake."

He tries his best to keep from pushing down on the gas pedal, but the temptation is far too great on these winding, empty backroads. Especially with the moon peeking out every now and then from behind tree branches, slightly ahead of his car, seemingly urging him on. Splices of Brian's bloodied face cleave their way into Will's reverie. He tamps down on the gas pedal, just a little.

Will arrives at his destination in record time, his fingertips buzzing with anticipation. He switches off his headlights as he turns down the access road for the junkyard. His ears itch with every ping of gravel against the underside of his car. He parks in the empty lot and scans the area for teenagers who like to drink under the privacy of the canopy of trees as opposed to under the roof of their guardian's house. The woods sound alive, not like a hushed secret when company is around. Will looks down at his personal cell phone lying in the dirt and dog hair lined cupholder. He grabs it quickly, thrusting it into his pocket as he leaves his car. He closes the door gently, still watching for movement. The shed door has finally released itself from the rusty hinges. It lays uselessly on the oil splattered ground. Several clumps of energy drink cans and small single serve bottles of alcohol surround the door, as if in communion. Will walks past the gutted car and spots a filmy

condom glistening against the dirt and gravel. He sneers as he continues into the forest with the smell of spermicide invading his nostrils.

Will takes the same meandering route the last time he was here, a path worn down from past wanderers. The air around him is heavy with the aroma of dead leaves and moist dirt. The weather is turning, becoming crisper at night with the transition into fall. And soon after winter. A season he has never done well with. Maybe this year will be different. Hannibal could be a very nice distraction from the lack of sun and the biting, raw cold. If only he could get these urges under control. Someone like Doctor Hannibal Lecter would never tolerate a partner who gets off on murder fantasies and following men home, pushing how far to take it each time. Hannibal is a man of refined taste. And Will needs to go from bargain bin ham to imported jamon iberico.

The woods are quieter now, all of the creature's preparations are happening underfoot. Will grabs the slim waist of a thin tree as he shuffles down a slight decline to get to another path that will take him to the river. He pauses sporadically to listen for the sika stag, not wanting to interrupt him from whatever it is they do at night.

Will reaches the barren shore of the river, he watches the water ripple slowly, tossing off glitter and shimmer to whoever wants it. Will breaths in the musky wet earth deeply as he starts to methodically remove his clothes. The air is cold against his fever flushed skin. It feels intoxicating. It feels clean. He carefully layers his clothing onto this jacket to keep track of things and to avoid getting crunchy leaf bits on his underwear. Will rolls his neck and closes his eyes as he stands on his pants with bare feet. He absurdly wishes that he had a mirror to watch his ministrations. Will swallows while trying to concentrate. Those vibrant, pesky flashes of Brian's bloody face and toothless grin are dull and blurred now. Will keeps trying, with one hand squeezing his upper thigh while the other lazily strokes his flaccid shaft. He shakes out his shoulders and switches to another thread of thought. What he really wanted to do to Matthew Brown.

Will pushes Matthew against the hard bricks, his head smacks wetly and bounces forward. Will grabs Matthew's throat, the muscles in his forearm straining with strength. And

Will nearly shouts with frustration. The cold is shooting up his bare feet to his taut calves. Will shifts his stance carefully to remain on his discarded pants. He looks up at the moon and sighs heavily, defeatedly. He shifts again as a foot nudges the cell phone in his pants pocket. Will crouches down to retrieve his phone. He stands up with the phone in his shaking hand, nearly panting with want. Hesitating, even though he already knows what he's

going to do, that's why he brought the phone, isn't it? It's why his fantasies are fading into flatness. They're just fantasies. Hannibal has actually killed someone. Eight someones to be exact. And the details are only a phone call away.

Hannibal answers on the second ring.

"Will? Is everything alright?" There's a slight edge of something different in his voice. Rushed.

What have you been doing, Doctor Lecter?

Will clears his throat. "I'm having some difficulty concentrating." A slight breeze knocks tree limbs against each other, like children shoving one another on the playground, anxiously waiting for things to happen.

"Are you outside?" Hannibal asks.

Will hears Hannibal shift in his bed, blankets being moved.

"Nothing gets past you, does it?" Will frowns.

Hannibal inhales and for an anxious moment Will worries that he can smell the arousal over the phone.

"I like to look at the moon. It helps me think," Will says.

"And what are you trying to concentrate on while gazing upon the moon?"

Will hears the soft rustling of a tissue being used to wipe against skin. His breath catches in his chest.

"You," he manages to whisper quietly enough that Hannibal doesn't hear the word, only the sigh of Will's breath.

"Will? What is it?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called. It's late and I didn't mean to interrupt your night." Will stammers as he throws his head back in disbelief.

"What's really on your mind? You can tell me." Hannibal encourages.

A twig snaps somewhere in the woods. Will stills his breathing. His eyes training for any movement.

"What did it feel like," Will pauses, unsure if he can say the words.

Hannibal waits until he understands, the pieces sliding neatly into place.

"Where are you, Will? I can be there shortly." Hannibal envisions the drive to Will's house. Speeding recklessly through the dark, all made worthwhile once he arrives and once he's on his knees with Will's tumescent cock sliding into his mouth.

"Just, please. Tell me how you did it. How you killed those men."

Will already knows the vague outline of the story. After Hannibal told him back in that dingy hotel which feels like months ago, Will couldn't stop thinking about it. He ended up abandoning his work to look up the crimes on his phone until he fell asleep. But he wants the technicolor version, the brightness of the blood, the color fading from their skin as their hearts stopped pumping, what kind of noises they made. Will isn't sure if he'll be able to

make it through one retelling let alone eight. His eyes are bigger than his stomach, wanting to gorge on all the tasty morsels of murderous memory. He readjusts his wants and decides to save some for later.

"Tell me about Paul Momund."

"I was cavalier and unenlightened. I disrespected my Aunt's ancestral tanto sword by gutting and then beheading an unworthy man."

Will feels himself hardening as he imagines Hannibal as a young man towering over some quivering dolt as he brandishes a shining blade, penetrating the man's guts with the cold steel. The man falls to his knees with fumbling hands trying to keep his insides from becoming outsides. Will slides a hand down to his quivering member while his other hand grips the top of his thigh. He closes his eyes.

"Go slower. I need," Will pauses to swallow, "details. What did it look like as his blood splattered out from his severed arteries onto the ground? Was he scared?" He stutters, fisting his already fully hard length from root to tip at a moderate pace.

Hannibal looks down at his own naked lap when he realizes what Will is doing. He licks his lips as he lightly palms his budding erection.

"He was pathetic and not worth my time."

Will sighs slightly, frustrated that Hannibal isn't playing along. "What did you do next?" Will roughly handles his sensitive cock.

"I picked up one of the smaller knives that he had for fishing purposes, and I removed his cheeks from his face. I roasted them over a fire and ate them."

"Oh my god," Will gasps.

“I wish I were there with you. It’s quite auspicious that you called me when you did. I was lying here, thinking about you.” Hannibal moves his hand up and down his shaft with barely enough pressure for his cock to register his touch. He massages his swollen testicles while pressing against the base of his cock with his middle finger. His core coils in pleasure.

“You were thinking about me while you,” Will trails off. “What would you do? If I was there with you.” Will stills his hand, waiting.

“It depends on how you would want me. I was so eager to get you in my mouth the last time. Maybe this time I’ll actually succeed. Would you like that Will? I’m very skilled with my mouth. You would have to trust me though, to not bite down. Since eating that man’s cheeks I’ve acquired the taste for human flesh.”

Will moans. His vision whites out in a blinding wave over him. His stomach flutters with release, spending against his unmoving hand. There are a few blissful moments before the guilt rushes in his lungs in great gulps of panic. Will’s eyes suddenly open wide and he’s thankful that he doesn’t have a mirror to reflect what he’s become. He quickly removes his hand from his deflating cock and walks to the river’s edge to rinse his hand, splashing water up to wash his belly as well. A flutter of wings catches his attention. Will looks up to the other side of the river. There the sika stag stands, watching him. A large black crow perches on a low hanging branch, delicately swaying on the breeze. The crow lifts off from the branch to fly towards the stag, dropping something small in front of him. The stag lowers his head to inspect the crow’s offering. Will hears fine bones crunching as the stag accepts the crow’s sacrament. The crow lands on the stag’s antlers, perching triumphantly.

“I can’t do this,” Will says.

But Hannibal is already exhaling into the phone as his own release relaxes his body. Will winces.

“That’s your guilt trying to steal this moment from you. Don’t let it.” He’s a little breathless. This isn’t how their first time was supposed to go. The acid tang of regret fills Hannibal’s mouth.

"The only thing that's been stolen from me is my sanity." Will disconnects the call.

He finishes cleaning himself up and changes into his forest soiled clothes before hurrying back to his car. He still has a lot to do tonight and Jack expects him in the office bright and early. At least Hannibal won't be there. In fact, Will never has to lay eyes on Hannibal ever again now that Dr. Bloom will be his attending psychiatrist. If only it were that easy.

I've acquired the taste for human flesh. Whispers in between each and every leaf, every single blade of grass under Will's shoes.

There are six documented types of cannibalism. Echoes behind Will's ear as he starts to pick up the pace, pushing himself to race the darkness settling in around him.

He would have to dry age for a few weeks, any sooner and the taste wouldn't be desirable. Tugs at his elbow, begging him to slow down. Will stumbles as the fear of the forest as a living and expanding creature, growing to keep him here, curdles his muscles into useless jelly. Will stops and falls to his knees, lungs heavy as he pants with sweat beading down his back. The crow calls from behind. But not as a taunt. It feels like a welcome.

Hannibal is a cannibal.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Hannibal ponders and Will flounders. Jack delegates while Brian deliberates. A dinner date is set.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for not posting last month. Winter and I are not on the best of terms. Especially when that cold bitch invites her friend covid over without even asking.

CW/TW- mentions of child and animal abuse, mentions of violence and murder, mentions of kidnapping and drugging, graphic depiction of gore and cannibalism, implied homophobia

Chapter 19

Hannibal remains motionless in the plasticky silence as if trapped in this scene of condemnation. He ponders the dark, dead screen on his phone still in his hand while his spent seed dries uncomfortably on his supple skin. He sighs and tosses the phone dramatically to the other end of the bed as he gets up to make his way to his en suite bathroom, wearing only the quietest of frowns upon his face.

He leaves the bathroom lights off and walks unhurriedly to the other end of the bathroom to turn on the shower. He waits a moment for the water to warm, the oils from his bath earlier still cling hopelessly in the air to be noticed, appreciated. Hannibal acquiesces, inhaling slowly as lavender and jasmine fill his head with delicate silk winged butterflies. But the heavy mechanisms of his thoughts pull them under and crush them to dust.

Hannibal steps into the glass enclosed shower, still cautious of getting his hair wet even though he left the rainfall shower head off. The midline shower head gently rinses away the

evidence of his thoughts about Will and how they affected him. But the feelings still linger like an ink stain on his skin. Hannibal washes himself and then his face efficiently while mulling Will's stubbornness to bend to his desires, much like a rusted poseable doll would under its maestro, seeming to have desires of its own.

He recalls the fleeting obsession he had as a child to lobotomize his friend, Gaspard, who had suddenly unfriended him after Hannibal warned Gaspard to stop bothering the swans. He found a medical journal in Mr. Jakov's library detailing a lobotomy using an icepick tilted upwards through the eye socket which was then tapped gently with a rubber mallet. Hannibal practiced on a few apples before catching a feral cat that scratched Mischa when she corned it while trying to pet it. Due to the writhing of the cat the operation was unsuccessful. He burned the cat in the fields far away from the castle. Hannibal wasn't prepared for the pungent smell of electrical burning as the hair singed away which then became a sort of fire cooked flesh smell that made his stomach rumble, reminding him of the open pyre cooking his family officiated during the winter festival. The experiment was a failure. However, Hannibal did learn that Gaspard probably wouldn't sit still either, no matter what kind of game Hannibal told him they were playing. He needed something to make his friend sleep. Mr. Jakov caught Hannibal rummaging through his travel medicine cabinet. Which led to a tedious lecture about the privacy of other's belongings that would have lasted much longer if Hannibal hadn't shouted at Mr. Jakov that he only wanted to make his friend listen to him and do what he wanted him to do. This brought about another lecture, this time in hushed tones with less passion about how boring it is to have someone respond to our every beckon call. And that no one is dull, you just have to look deeper. The joy of friendship is the joy of discovery. Hannibal rolled his eyes at Mr. Jakov before leaving but the sentiment burrowed deep within his psyche, shaping him even to this day.

Hannibal turns off the water and reaches for a plush towel with practiced grace, patting himself dry and then replacing the towel to the rack to air dry. He walks back into his bedroom veering slightly to the left to enter his walk-in closet. He considers the pyjama options before him, each hanging neatly with their coordinating top and bottom on the same cushioned satin hanger. Hannibal selects the claret mulberry silk long sleeved set as a treat. He slips into the top first, relishing the cool fabric against his skin like a refreshing mint for his body after such harsh remembrances of his youth. Hannibal admires how the opal buttons compliment the delicate white piping. He smooths down the notched collar of the v neck to prevent creasing. Next, he slides into the bottoms with much appreciation for the strong and neat French seaming. He practically glides out of his closet with the silk deliciously caressing the sensitive skin of his member. Hannibal ignites the fireplace before sitting down in one of the chairs strategically angled near its warmth and glow. He sighs as his thoughts start to crowd him in his contented silence.

It will only be a matter of time now before dear Will pieces everything together, drawing a lifeline from his home in Lithuania, to France, then to his rebellious and brutal phase in

Italy where he earned the name Il Mostro, next the cave houses in Spain where he hid, Canada and finally here. With plenty of scattered bodies like signposts to keep Will from getting lost. How soon and what he does with his conclusions Hannibal will not make assumptions about since they tend to be fruitless. It's within the patterns of behavior that the seeds of personality are hidden.

He thinks back to his most recent kill, the impatient man that tossed out insults like litter. He was large and imposing but nonetheless crumbled once faced with his own mortality. Hannibal sneers while remembering how the man begged, pleaded on behalf of his daughter for Hannibal not to kill him. He reached for his wallet to show Hannibal a picture of them together; her blonde hair and blue eyes with a punch tinted grin and lanky arms wrapped around her father for a piggyback ride. The father hunched forward with one arm grasping his daughter as the other kept the plastic tiara from falling off his head. Hannibal noticed chips of sparkly pink nail polish still flecked around the cuticles of the man's nails. It was an amusing contradiction. Nothing more.

Hannibal tilts his head back as he crosses an ankle over to rest on his knee. He rubs his palms against the soft leather armrests, unable to stop his thoughts from comparing Miriam to his last kill. How she fought against him as he locked an arm around her slender neck, kicking back at him as he lifted her petite frame from the floor, her short nails desperately digging into the exposed flesh of his hand, seemingly forgetting any self-defense training she had. Her skin smelled lovely; he couldn't resist nuzzling into the crook of her neck as he breathed in the fragrant citrus of her panic. Miriam managed to kick out against his desk, knocking them both to the floor. But Hannibal's grasp remained locked on her, much like a dog with prey in its jaw. For months afterward when the haze of her confusion lifted Hannibal could see moments of recognition flash in her eyes. Recognition and rage hidden inside her. Maybe she wasn't even aware what she was hiding until Hannibal brought it out of her, the young trainee with the polite smile and self-deprecating remarks, shyly inquiring about some dead patient of his. She would surely eviscerate him now if given the chance. Alas, there will be no time now for such tempting distractions with how quickly things are going to proceed.

Hannibal closes his eyes as he considers Will. No doubt that pretty little mind of his will figure out that he is the Chesapeake Ripper first. Chesapeake Ripper. Hannibal despises that name. It sounds so indignant. Like some backwoods inbred with dirt under his nails disemboweling women because they make him feel tingly beneath his belt. But what else could one expect from someone like Freddy Lounds? At least Il Mostro felt magnanimous, albeit a little contrite, as if all he needed was a kiss from a fair maiden to stop his wrongdoings. He still has all of those articles bookmarked. He could forward them all to Will. Even the potentially drug fueled slapdash article Lounds wrote several years back asserting a connection between Il Mostro and the Ripper. He even included a picture of a corkboard with red twine tethering the similarities across continents.

But the question remains, will it be a struggle for Will to accept what Hannibal has done and what he is because then Will would have to accept the same for himself? Is Will like a moth struggling to remove its own chrysalis? Perhaps he just needs some assistance in his transformation so that he can spread his wings. Hannibal is more than capable to oblige; he's done it before. And Will won't abandon him like the others did, thusly allowing Hannibal the time to teach Will to use his piercing mouth to find sustenance in other's tears before ultimately progressing to blood. All he needs is a little tug.

Will looks up into the maroon eyes, glowing like cinders about to ignite in the darkness surrounding them. Will clutches Hannibal's hand as he dangles hopelessly in the air. He chances a look down, all the way down, sixty feet down, to rocks and a half-dried valley. He won't survive the fall. Will's boots scramble against the face of the cliff in a frenzied attempt to regain his place atop the bluff with Hannibal.

"The bluff is eroding, Will." Hannibal serenely states to Will.

"No, no, don't." Will says.

He tries to shift his body weight to swing his other hand into Hannibal's grasp. He doesn't understand why Hannibal won't pull him up. Even one-handed Hannibal has the strength to carry Will.

Hannibal leans his head down, closer to Will's hand. He rests his lips upon Will's fingers for a moment before lightly kissing them.

"Save yourself." Hannibal says as he lets go of Will.

Will opens his mouth in disbelief as he watches Hannibal get up from laying on his stomach and proceed to brush the dust off his black suit jacket and pants. Funeral attire. They lock eyes for a brief moment before Will falls away from Hannibal's view.

This should only last for two seconds.

But time slows under the weightless freedom of falling.

Will looks around him, attempting to see through the dark to focus on anything besides falling.

But there is only darkness.

It consumes him.

Swallows him whole.

Until he is the darkness.

The force of the air pushes Will's arms up, straining the muscles in his shoulders. He tries to reposition his arms, fighting against the wind. Just as he manages a more comfortable position the wind coerces his arms back to where they were. It's getting warmer now. Will can feel heat against the sides of his body, especially under his arms. He tries again to move his arms downwards. But this time as the wind harasses his body into the shape it wants, Will feels a spark ignite within him. Flames erupt from his shoulder blades and down the sides of his body like a pair of blazing wings lighting up the dark. Will starts to sweat under the hot burning of the flames but there is no pain. The flames grow in size as they consume his clothing and lick at the sweat coating his body. Will can see outside of himself for a fractured second as he continues to fall. It's beautiful. The black sky is punched with glistening stars of assorted colors and brightness as his enflamed naked body descends to the earthen floor beneath him. The moon is eclipsed and emanates a red glow from behind her obstruction. The bright from the fire highlights the sculpted peaks and valleys of Will's sinewy muscles as he falls elegantly with a grace he never thought he was capable of. The dark lifts a little as the moon outgrows her obstruction, tinting the world a murky red.

Will is back in his body and exhales harshly as his bare feet make impact with the hard ground first. His breath clouds heavily in front of his face and rains blood unto the parched dirt beneath him. The force drives his tibia and fibula bones up and through his flesh,

impaling him. He falls onto his hands and knees. But there is no relief for Will as the brunt of his weight on his palms pushes his ulna and radius bones outside of his body. Will throws his head back in a silent scream before he begins to crawl. His bones continue to push out from his body, splitting his skin in the process. Still, Will compels himself onward leaving tattered slips of his skin behind him. There is an ocean nearby, he can hear the waves violently crashing against the shore. There's safety in water. The ground under his hands becomes slick with his own blood. Will falters. His bones grid and splinter until they are pushed out from his old body. Then he drags himself forward, pulling himself out of the remainder of his old skin and bones. The cool air flits around Will's new skin as he stands in the red glow of the moon. He looks at his hand, turning it over in wonderment as he takes in his unblemished skin. Will inhales deeply, feeling taller. He starts to walk but is stopped abruptly as something holds him back.

Will looks behind him to see his old skin still attached at his ankles weighing him down.

"May I be of assistance?"

Hannibal, in all of his naked glory, steps into view from the shadows of where the moon has yet to reach. His fingertips, hands and halfway up his forearms are an inky black, as are his toes, feet and calves. He exhales shadows into existence from his blackened mouth. Will unabashedly looks over Hannibal's physique, lingering on the heavy weight between his formidable thighs, before looking into Hannibal's smoldering eyes without shame. They are equals now.

Will nods his consent. Hannibal kneels onto the blood-soaked trail Will has left behind him and takes the skin into his hands. He begins to pull, tugging harshly at the bounds still connecting Will to his former body. Will gives merely an inch but remains standing tall as he is released from the last of his remains. Hannibal gathers the flesh for himself. He lowers his head to his palms to feast upon his meal. Will approaches Hannibal.

"How do I taste?"

Hannibal hesitates in devouring his banquet as he looks up at Will with a blood-stained mouth. He smiles with shining eyes.

"Triumphant." Hannibal holds his hands out to Will as an offering.

Will takes another step closer to Hannibal before kneeling in front of him. He eats of his own flesh from Hannibal's palms, teeth tearing tissue as he chews and swallows. The meat erupts into a symphony of delicious feelings and colors, bright yellows and vindication. It's the best thing Will has ever tasted. Unless.

"What do you taste like?"

Hannibal licks his lips. The flesh drops from his hands onto the dusty earth as he turns his head to present his throat to Will. Will leans forward with panting breath as he fastens his hungry mouth against the tender flesh. Will bites down, testing the resistance first. Warm, sweet blood trickles onto his tongue. Desire swarms his head as he closes his eyes against the spin. He bites harder, inspiring Hannibal to moan lowly above him. Will's sharp teeth break through the yielding flesh. Hannibal moans passionately again, louder this time. Will feels it echo in his new bones. Will tears away from Hannibal's neck with a mouthful of flesh between his teeth. He lets the meat rest upon his tongue so that he may savor the complicated melody of flavors. Hannibal brings his arms up to envelop Will in a tight embrace, drawing him near to his beating heart. Will leans into Hannibal to lap at the blood spilling from his throat. He pulls back to look at Hannibal's eyes.

"More. I need more of you. All of you," Will says.

"Anything for you, Will," Hannibal says.

Will's eyes wander Hannibal's supple flesh before resting on the meaty expanse of his thigh. Will lowers his head and lets his nose brush against the side of Hannibal's engorged quivering member. Will licks his lips. He sinks his teeth into Hannibal's thigh.

"What do I taste like?" Hannibal asks.

Will chews slowly, considering the delicate nuances of Hannibal's character before the word leaps forward onto his tongue.

Will startles himself awake with the sound of a scream still smearing the air around him a murderous red. He isn't sure if he made that brutal sound. All of his focus right now is on the contracting of his testicles and the spasming of his cock as he ejaculates. His stomach flutters from the euphoric release as he lays still for a moment to catch his breath. He feels absolutely glorious. Will remembers the last time he had a wet dream, senior year of high school he took an AP forensics class. One of the topics was blood splatter analysis. But that didn't feel as good as this did. He waits for his thoughts and anxieties to dial back up to their normal volume. There's only quiet clarity. A cricket chirps beneath the window.

As Will gets up from the couch, tossing the thin blanket to the floor, he wonders why he slept here instead of his bed. Pain dully throbs as the soles of his feet slap against the floorboards while he walks to the bathroom to clean himself off. Will flicks on the bathroom light only to be shocked by the sight in the mirror. Streaks of dried dirt crust his forehead, there are a few leaf and twig bits tangled in his hair. He looks down at his hands which are caked with grim and there's dirt under his nails. Will clenches his sore hands as more dull pain throbs up to his forearms all the way to his tense shoulders. As he closes his eyes, he vaguely remembers holding a shovel and digging. He must've buried Zoe when he got back from the junkyard. He doesn't remember. This fact doesn't bother him as much as it should. Something has changed inside him, shifted into its rightful place. And it feels damn good. What doesn't feel good is how his shirt is drying stiffly to his skin. The faintest smell of smoke wafts around Will as he walks up the stairs to shower. The sun is starting to rise. She catches Will's eyes as she glints weakly in Will's damaged glasses that he left atop his dresser as he passes his bedroom window. Will pauses. He leans forward to snatch the glasses, suddenly embarrassed that he ever used them in the first place, like a kid far too old to have a blankey. He tosses them into the trash before shedding his clothes to shower. It's going to be a good day today. Maybe he'll even stop for a coffee and a sandwich on his way to work.

Even though it's only been a week since Will has been in the lab, he's never forgotten how much Brian Zeller's whistling especially gets on his nerves here. It's loud, pinging off key down the hallways, and unrelenting. That glorious feeling starts to wane. Will pinches the top of the bridge of his nose while tightly squeezing his red rimmed eyes shut. This isn't the ideal situation to come back to work to, feeling as raw as he does. Will enters the conference room that Jack has been commandeering for the co-ed case, pictures and maps pinned to a corkboard with a whiteboard next to it with leads. One is far less populated than the other.

Zeller stops whistling when he sees Will, the tune dies on his lips like a songbird caught in a cold snap.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” He’s smirking at Will.

“Would you prefer something more intimate?” Will approaches Zeller with his head lowered, his eyes catching the fluorescent lights so that they shine golden for a flash.

Brian blinks, unsure of what he just saw. He shakes his head as Will continues towards him. “Nahh, I’m good, man.”

He doesn’t offer his condolences for Will’s dad dying. The one smart thing he’s probably done in a long time. Will continues past Zeller to look over the boards, standing closer than necessary to Brian. It unnerves him. He doesn’t continue to whistle.

Will wants to make a snide comment about how the rest of his night went with Erin but his tired brain can’t order the words properly without it sounding like he’s flirting with him. His bleary eyes quickly hone in on the word cannibal written on the board with a question mark next to it. His stomach clenches.

The door bangs open, sounding eerily like Beau’s head as it cracked against the bathroom mirror at the dive bar in Louisiana, as it knocks against the rubber stopper, throwing itself into Jack’s hands as he stops the door from slamming into his body. Jack enters the room like a storm. His brow is already deeply creased and his shoulders are squared. This is the type of day that the only correct responses are affirmative ones. Will’s muscles relax a little. He turns away from the boards and picks a seat at the table that faces the door. Bev and Price quickly follow behind Jack. Bev sits next to Will while Price sits across from them to be next to Zeller. There are two ominous empty chairs. Jack stands at the front of the room, commanding their attention. One of his hands grips a thin file.

“I didn’t realize that Freddy Lounds was on my payroll.” The file thwacks against the table.

Bev bravely reaches for it first, leaving it mostly in the middle for everyone to see as she opens it. The pages are print outs from the Tattlecrime website detailing the co-ed case. There are several photos of the corkboards behind Jack. Bev keeps turning the pages. Crime

scene photos in vivid color from the daisy and candy-coated case. Next, the interviews with the good ole boys from Louisiana. Finally, the last page is the expose about Will Graham.

"I hope the money was fucking worth it. Unless one of you is fucking him, which I find hard to believe, that man has got to be in his sixties by now."

"Ohh, is someone a gerontophile?" Price excitedly questions.

Bev closes the file. "That man has underlings everywhere," Bev says.

"I know." Jack says as he looks to each of them for a pointed moment.

Brian tries his best to not stiffen under his boss's undivided attention. He stuffs his hands into his leather bomber jacket pockets only to be reminded of his sordid nighttime activity with Erin right in this very room, on this same table, only a few hours ago. He carefully removes his hands to keep her panties in his pocket. The black lacy thong ones that she knows are his favorite. He found them bundled up in the corner of the room when he came in this morning. Brian barely had the time to look casual when Graham showed up earlier than usual looking bright eyed and bushy tailed with a fucking coffee no less.

"Needless to say, Prurnell is pissed and wants us for damage control in Minnesota. We meet with mayor what's his name this afternoon for a briefing. Zeller and Graham will leave in an hour to get us situated at the police station they're loaning out to us. We'll have more bodies to work this thing which is good considering we've gotten nowhere. Bev and I will be an hour behind you two. Price, I need you to stay here." Jack stares at each one of them, daring them to defy his orders.

Price shrugs his shoulders. "I'm happy to man the fort at home base so to speak. Plane rides don't agree with me."

"Yeah, sitting still for hours really isn't your forte," Zeller says.

Jack snatches the file while Bev and Will exchange quick glances. She looks to Jack, wanting to say something and Jack senses this. He shakes his head without looking at Bev before leaving the conference room. Bev has no choice but to follow him. She hastily gets up and quickens her pace to catch up to Jack.

"Sir, maybe I should go with Graham instead of Brian?" She walks briskly beside him.

"Are you questioning my leadership, Katz?" His long strides don't slow down.

"Not at all. I'm only questioning why you think it's a good idea to have those two alone on a three-hour flight."

"Plenty of time for them to work out whatever's going on between them, don't you think?"

Bev furrows her brow. "You think Brian is selling out to Lounds, don't you?"

Jack pauses, slapping the file against his thigh. He turns to Bev. "I didn't say that. But you just did." He continues walking, leaving a stunned Bev behind.

"Well, I'm going back to the lab, got some latent fingerprints to index. You two behave yourselves now." Price throws a pitiful wink in Will's direction as he leaves.

Will gets up.

"I'm driving!" Brian nearly shouts. "Just so we're clear." He adds in a quieter tone.

"Fine. I have to make a call. I'll meet you in the garage."

Zeller smirks. "Gotta let the boyfriend know you'll be late for dinner? Or are you going to bribe him to babysit your dogs?" He chuckles to himself. "Just how many blowjobs does something like that cost?"

"Why? Are you thinking about getting a dog?"

Brian pales a little. "What? No. That's not what I meant." He stammers.

"Don't you also have someone to call?' Will walks around the table to stand closer to Brian.

Brian shakes his head. "Nahh, man. I don't need to check in with the old ball and chain."

"That's right, no crime scene photos to sell this time." Will pats Brian's shoulder in consolation.

"Hey man, get off me!" Brian shrugs Will's hand off him. "I'm not a rat. I don't know what you're talking about."

"It must be a coincidence then that all of these articles with lurid details and stunning high-res shots are available on that shitty little website after you manage to get yourself a girlfriend."

"Do yourself a favor and keep her out of whatever goes on in that disturbed mind of yours. Don't talk about her. And that's a serious accusation you're making, career ending, in fact. I suggest you drop it." Brian pushes his chair back to stand up tall in front of Will.

"What if I don't want to? How are you going to suggest that I drop it?" Will leans into Brian's personal space.

There's a predatory leer in his eyes that unnerves Brian. So, he pushes Will away from him. Will stumbles backwards a little, surprised that Brian had it in him, it ignites that glorious feeling to swell inside him again. Will slowly reaches a hand out, wanting to wrap his fingers around Brian's throat. Brian swats it down. He jabs a finger into Will's chest, feeling his rapid heartbeat thrumming under his shirt.

"You need to learn some boundaries."

Will takes a step forward, further driving Brian's finger into his chest. "Show me how. Push me again."

Brian sighs and folds his arms across his chest. "Yeah, keep talking like that. You're unstable, Graham. You shouldn't even be here. And when you snap, because it's not a matter of if anymore is it, I'm going to be there when it happens. I can play the long game."

Will licks his lips, tasting the yellow hues of triumph deep down in his bones. He leans forward and whispers, "I also hope that you're there."

An icy sharpness blows against the back of Brian's exposed neck. He tries his best to suppress the shiver that shakes his body.

Will keeps his gaze locked on Brian. "Have you heard the rumor?" He asks.

Brian rolls his eyes and shakes his head. This is the longest Will has ever held eye contact with him and he wishes that he would stop.

"Rumor has it Lounds has a daughter," he says.

"Fuck man, I don't care. Just go get your shit together." Brian waves a dismissive hand in Will's face.

Will regains his posture and leaves the conference room. Brian's shoulders slump in exasperation once he's alone. He rolls his neck and clears his throat before reaching into one of his front pockets of his jeans to get his phone. He texts Erin.

Ive been burned

No more pics

And you still owe me for the last one

Brian stares at his phone, hoping for a speedy reply. His phone lights up in his hand with an incoming call from Erin. Brian quickly answers it while going to the door to make sure no one is lurking in the hallway.

"Babe, I can't talk now. I'm at work." He whispers into the phone.

"You sound like you're in a rush. Something happen, bedbug?" Her voice is cool and calm.

Calculating. Brian can't believe he's never noticed this about her before. He turns to lean his back against the door.

"I've got to go. But what we were doing with Lounds is over."

She huffs mildly. "You're fine, no one knows. How could they? We can't stop now, not when you're so close. Getting this could be what makes Jack see you as lead detective material and then you can finally get rid of Will."

"Yeah, I know." Brian sighs. "But I don't see what that has to do with the other thing." He lets his body slide down the door until he's seated on the floor.

"You're so lucky to have me, bedbug. Sometimes it's nice to have someone on your side to tip the scales in your favor when the odds are against you."

Brian sits still for several moments. The motion sensored lights turn off.

"Come over later. I can give you the rest of the payment from Lounds and we can talk about this if it's still on your mind."

Brian sighs. "I can't tonight. I've got this thing and I don't know how late I'll be."

Erin perks up. "Did he take another?"

"No, not yet. We got to do damage control with the masses. You know how things are in Minnesota right now with all that happened last summer."

"Oh," Erin says dejectedly.

"Alright. I got to head out. Graham's waiting on me."

"We're still in this, right?"

Brian leans his head against the door and closes his eyes. "Yeah. But only for this one. Not the Ripper or any others. Okay?"

"Okay. Miss you already."

"Ditto. Hey, umm, what did you say your dad's name was again?"

She doesn't pause to think, she answers immediately. "Philip. Why are you asking?"

"Do you think I'll ever get to meet him? I mean, I want to, is what I'm trying to say."

Erin exhales into the phone. "We aren't really on speaking terms now."

"What about your mom?" He reopens his eyes.

"I haven't seen her in years. You're moving kinda fast, Brian. We've only been seeing each other for like two months and all of a sudden you're asking to meet my parents? Don't tell me you've got a ring hiding somewhere in your apartment?" She laughs lightly to cover her annoyance.

"No." He says louder than he intended. "No." He repeats quieter, hoping he didn't insult her. "Graham's got me all mixed up. But I'm good now. Look, I gotta go before he starts looking for me."

"Has he been saying nasty things about me?"

"Of course not, he wouldn't dare. He umm, just mentioned Lounds has a daughter. Did you know that? You've been following his work for a while, has that ever come up on those message boards or anything?"

Erin scoffs. "It's gossip, bedbug. Probably made up by someone to lessen his credibility or rebrand his public image. You could ask him."

Brian straightens up. "Really?"

"Next time you have something, I'll arrange for you to give it to him yourself."

"Alright. Yeah, I like the sound of that." He smiles widely in the dark room.

Two sets of footfalls pass by the conference room, speaking in hushed tones. Brian's shoulders tense in panic.

"I really have to hang up now. I'm glad I got to talk to you. I feel so much better now."

Erin hmms into the phone.

"Okay, I'll see you later, bye." He waits for her to say it back before disconnecting the call, which takes longer than usual.

"Bye." Erin finally replies once she realizes he's waiting on her. She was lost in her thoughts about how to arrange for Brian to meet her dead father who she was named after, Freddy Lounds.

Brian puts his phone back into his jean's pocket and slides his hand into his jacket pocket to finger the fragile lace panty as he thinks things over.

Will paces just outside the garage since he can't get service under the spiraling cement levels. His phone is in his hand with Hannibal's contact info on the screen. Will takes a breath and hits call. Hannibal answers on the second ring, as per usual.

"Will? I only have fifteen minutes before my first appointment. Maybe we can speak privately later this evening?"

"I'm not calling about that. I need a favor."

“I see,” Hannibal says. Will can hear him rapping his fingertips against his desk impatiently.

“Jack needs me in Minnesota and I don’t know how long I’ll be there. Would you be able to check in on my dogs?”

The tapping stops.

“I just don’t know who else to ask and you’re the only person I trust to look after them.” Will knows he’s rambling, but he can’t stop himself. “They should be fine until later this afternoon. And then there’s dinner. I can reimburse you for gas money. I’ll even pay you.”

“Don’t insult me by offering to pay me. Yes, I can manage to care for your dogs.”

“Okay, good. That’s great. Thank you.” Will ducks his head into the garage to check for Brian.

“Anything else I can assist you with?” Hannibal asks.

Will frowns at the bitter taste Hannibal’s tone leaves in his mouth. “Have dinner with me tonight. When I get back, I can make us something and we can talk about things. I know it’s long overdue.” Hannibal gave him a rare gift. It would be rude to not return the favor.

Hannibal smiles to himself as he leans back in his leather office chair. “That sounds delightful. However, I’ve never been the type to wait longingly for someone. Especially considering that you don’t know when you’ll return. It could be tomorrow. Not to mention that you might make me dinner from something in a tin, or worse a microwave.”

"No, tonight. I promise. I'm not going to a crime scene; he didn't take another. It's just some briefing with the mayor. Lounds riled up Prurnell by making us look inept so now we've got to show how professional we are in person." Will artfully ignores Hannibal's appalment about his dinner options because then Will would have to explain why he isn't ready for Hannibal to cook for him. Not yet at least.

"How white collar of Jack."

"Shit. Brian just walked into the garage. I should be home no later than eight tonight. I'll see you then?"

"I suppose I could pencil you in," Hannibal says.

"Okay, great," Will says lightly. He's surprised at how easy it is to speak to Hannibal, to hear his voice after their intimate phone call only hours ago and his even more personal dream.

"Goodbye Will," Hannibal says as he disconnects the call.

A sharp whistle cuts through the air.

"Let's go Graham! We're cutting departure time close!" Brian yells into the empty space around him.

Will sighs heavily, suddenly very tired at the thought of spending the next several hours with Brian. He hopes that the underpaid pencil pusher that booked their tickets wasn't able to acquire two seats next to each other. Either way, it's going to be a bumpy ride and Will doesn't have the safety cushion of Hannibal's pills to soften this dreadful experience. He's free falling.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

oooookay so, this is quite the long chapter... Will and Brian journey to Minnesota and it doesn't go well. Will comes home to Hannibal and they have dinner *wink wink*

Chapter Notes

cw/tw- implied homophobia, sexual harassment, gore/murderous imagery, abuse of alcohol, implied racism, implied cannibalism and sexual content

Chapter 20

Brian blares the car horn as he slowly drives past Will who's still standing next to the ill cared for shrubbery planted just outside the parking garage. Will jogs a little to not be left behind, sliding his phone into his pants pocket as he approaches the passenger side of the borrowed suv. Springsteen is already playing at a volume to deter conversation. Will doesn't mind.

Brian keeps his eyes straight ahead as Will opens the door and gets into the car. Will quickly casts a glance to the empty back seat.

"Did you remember to pick up the doc boxes from Jodie in evidence?" Will asks loudly.

Brian sneers. "We don't travel with banker's boxes full of paper anymore. It's all about encrypted storage now." His tone is disdainful.

Will takes a breath through his nose before opening his mouth to ask another question.

"Please don't ask what I think you're going to ask," Brian says.

Will clenches his jaw.

"Your plane ticket is in your email. Check your work phone." Brian shakes his head.

Instead of checking his phone like Brian suggested, Will leans forward to lower the stereo volume.

“Is that rock n roll music too loud for ya gramps? I always knew you had “get off my lawn” energy about you.” Brian smirks while still keeping his eyes on the road as he navigates onto the highway.

Will doesn’t respond. Their earlier confrontation has left him more than a little tired. So, they sit without speaking for a few songs before Will finally decides to reach into his pocket for his work phone. His digital plane ticket is in his email inbox, just as Brian said it would be. But tension still wraps her strong hands around Will’s head, blurring his vision as he reads over the ticket information.

“Why are we using Reagan instead of Dulles?”

Bursts of panic floods Will’s skin with heat as sweat beads under his arms. He’s never been to Reagan airport. Will wrongly assumed that they would be using the Dulles airport, the one he went to with Hannibal, the one that he knows and is comfortable with.

“Reagan is closer by about fifteen minutes, twenty if I speed a little, and they had a sooner departure. Plus, they set aside some free parking spots for agents.” Brian side eyes Will. “So, you’re lucky you’re riding with me since you’re not an agent.”

Brian’s words spark Will’s temper, sending the prickling pain of animosity thrumming through his veins. His entire body itches. Will suddenly feels very awake.

“Thank you, Brian, for being so kind and generous. How could someone so lowly as me ever repay a big-time agent such as yourself?” Will tries for boyishly sweet but ends up sounding pornishly desperate.

Brian’s shoulders raise as Will says his name as if someone walked over his grave.

“Alright, alright. Enough.”

“Is it enough? Be honest with me, you’ve been thinking about this for a while now. And we’re finally alone.” Will places his hand high on Brian’s tense thigh. He brushes his thumb over the sturdy jean fabric while staring deeply at the side of Brian’s reddened face.

Brian whips his head, turning to finally look at Will. His face withers into a pitiful mask of overreaction. There’s a hint of arousal about his eyes and mouth. It feels blue to Will, sad. Repressed. Will grins wolfishly in vindication. He squeezes, digging his tingling fingertips further into Brian’s ridged flesh.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Brian sputters breathlessly as he presses down on the gas pedal.

Will edges his fingers closer to the growing bulge in Brian’s jeans, just skimming the outline of his testicle. Brian’s head lolls back against the headrest as he blinks slowly. It takes him a couple of times to swallow properly. The arousal has heightened now, radiating off him in scarlet waves.

“We should just get this over with, don’t you agree? Release all of this hot, creamy tension between us.” Will slips his hand deeper into Brian’s personal space while his other hand reaches for Brian’s cell phone that was carelessly left in one of the console’s cupholders while his work phone navigates their way to the airport.

“Stop,” Brian whispers. The car careens off the pavement and onto the shoulder for an uneasy moment, spitting gravel and dust behind them. Brian over corrects the wheel which earns him an irritated honk from the driver in the next lane.

“At least say it with some conviction,” Will coaxes.

Will accesses Brian’s phone with his free hand as his other hand continues its taunting massage. Brian's phone doesn’t have a passcode to unlock it. Will isn’t surprised. Brian is arrogant enough to think that he’ll never get caught. He reads the latest messages from Erin thusly confirming his hunch that they have been working with Lounds. Brian removes his hand closest to Will from the steering wheel to try to pry Will’s grip from his thigh or at least stop his teasing massage from becoming a problem. He chances a glazed glance over to Will. His eyes open wide in terror.

“Hey! That’s my phone!” Brian reaches for his phone, but Will pulls it away.

Brian looks back to the road and slams on the brakes to prevent them from rear ending the stopped car in front of them.

Will quickly forwards the messages that he needs to his phones before tossing the phone onto Brian’s lap, making contact with the swelling protrusion between his legs. Brian winces in pain.

“If we had time, I would pull this fucking car over and bash your face in.” Brian says with anger seething between his teeth.

“I can’t tell if you’re flirting with me or threatening me,” Will says.

Brian chews his bottom lip while shaking his head.

“What happens now? You’re gonna tattle on me to Jack? Huh?”

“Not unless you give me reason to.” Will smirks.

Brian’s jugular vein strains while he struggles to breathe through his resentment.

“Blackmail. Great. Fucking Will Graham the little weasel is blackmailing me. I can’t believe this.” He slaps his palms against the steering wheel.

“Almost as unbelievable as you harboring a mean little crush on me this entire time.”

“Fuck off. Don’t say anything else to me.” Brian turns the volume back up to drown out Will.

Will relaxes into his seat with the satisfied grin of a weasel besting a snake.

The remainder of the ride is both too long and too short in that microwaved sort of way. With one glimmer of relief when whatever music app Brian uses shuffles to keep on chooglin' by CCR. Brian swiftly leans forward to skip the song. Will sighs.

They arrive at the parking lot reserved for federal agents at the top of a separate parking garage with its own private entrance and security check. There are plenty of spots to choose from but Brian parks in one that is closest to the entrance door. He turns off the engine and gets out of the car without acknowledging Will's existence. He does wait, however, until Will shuts the door to activate the car security alarm. The loud chirping makes Will jump which Brian would've enjoyed if he had been paying attention.

Brian approaches the door which lacks a handle and presses a doorbell like button while flashing his badge at some unseen live feed camera. A short man with closely cropped curly hair wearing ill-fitting khakis opens the door wide. He looks over Brian's id with such apathy that Will almost admires him. He nods his head for Brian to enter but holds his hand up when Will tries to sneak in after.

"Where's your badge, sir?"

Will resists the urge to sigh while reaching into his pocket for his special id lanyard. He doesn't need to look at Brian to know that this little interlude is deeply gratifying to him.

"That's not a proper id," the man begins to say as Brian turns to interject. His eyes widen as he reads the name. "Will Graham, no fucking way! Sorry sir," he says to Brian. "I thought it was only a rumor that you would be here today. This is so cool!" He exclaims while still blocking the doorway.

Will smiles thinly. He looks at the man and then at the doorway.

"Right, you guys are probably on your way to solve some gruesome murder." He finally steps aside to let Will through.

"Thank you," Will quickly scans for his name tag. "Evan."

Evan grins.

Brian shakes his head in disbelief. "Get moving, Graham," he says tiredly.

Will brushes past Evan to join Brian inside the building, placing a hand on his shoulder as he does so, patting Evan fraternally. Brian clenches his jaw as he watches the affair. Evan shuffles aside to his compact office with a goofy smirk on his face to let the agents be on their way. Brian rushes ahead with long strides, leaving Will and Evan to exchange quick glances before Will starts after Brian. As they walk through the hallway, they pass a little room with a table and chairs and several vending machines. Will smells coffee that would make Hannibal's eyes water with disgust. They continue walking the long hall, Brian slightly ahead of Will with a determined pace, until they reach a door. Will steadies himself for the onslaught of lights and sounds as Brian opens the door to the hub of the airport. The fluorescent bulbs flicker and sear his sensitive skin with their blaring white glow. Will tightly closes his eyes for a moment to readjust. When he reopens them, he notices that the hallway,

luckily, put them near their terminal. The loud conversations crackle in his ears with a muted quality like blown out speakers as he dashes to the seating area. Will rubs his moist, heated palms against his thighs as he outpaces Brian to grab a seat, counting each stride as he goes. Fifteen. Will plunks down onto the hard plastic seat and practices breathing squarely to try to calm his stuttering heartbeat and rising nausea. Brian chooses a seat far away from Will.

They wait. Every now and then Will casts his eyes sideways to check on Brian, fiddling with his phone, no doubt texting Erin about what happened. Probably leaving out some key details. As Will starts to settle his surroundings take on edges. Snipes of feelings cut their way into his thoughts. *Hopefully this cancer treatment is the last one, I can't keep missing work.* The man with the freshly shaved head taps two pills into his brown palm and swallows them dryly. *Do you think daddy will be excited to see me this time?* A child whispers into the ear of her plush rabbit seated next to her. *I should've packed the red stilettos; she went wild for those the last time.* The woman bites her freshly painted red nails while staring at her black heels nervously. Will tightly closes his eyes to try to stop the delicately twitching muscle under his right eye. Cannibal or not, Hannibal would be excellent company right about now. And not just for his superb access to pharmaceuticals. Will wonders what Hannibal's cock will taste like as it slides into his mouth. The loudspeaker overhead advises the passengers to start boarding. Will opens his eyes, gets up and starts to meander over to the line, knowing for certain that he's going to fuck Hannibal when he gets home tonight.

Brian and Will aren't seated next to each other on the plane. It's a small consolation. But Will appreciates it all the same. He slips in to take his window seat, anxiously jiggling his leg while he waits for his row mates. A rather large woman lumbers down the aisle with her small carryon bag. Sweat gathers on her brow and clumps her brunette bangs into tendrils across her forehead. There's a wheeze coming from deep within her chest. Her eyes are downcast with the awareness that everyone is staring at her. She stops to brace herself, angling her body just so before lowering herself onto the aisle seat. The empty seat between them will remain so. The woman exhales and pulls a kerchief out from her sweatpants pocket to wipe her damp brow and the back of her neck. She unzips her bag, rummaging around for a bit before finding her seatbelt extender. She also shimmies her crocs off her feet a little so that she can wiggle her socked toes and roll her ankles. Her socks have little dachshunds wearing berets and carrying baguettes on them. Will watches this scene respectfully, not staring but observing. He leans towards the woman with a bowed head.

"I have a dog just like that at home, but she hates when I put hats on her." Will flicks his eyes to her socks.

She smiles, lighting up her pale blue eyes rather prettily.

"What's her name?"

"Brigitte Barkdog," he lies.

"Aww, that's so cute! Do you have any pictures?"

Will glances up at the woman, eyes glossy. "She died the other day and it's still difficult to look at pictures. But I'm easing into talking about her."

“Oh, I'm sorry.” Her mouth turns down at the corners into a pouty little frown which Will would think insincere if it weren't for the tears shining in her eyes.

Will nods while looking solemn. “Thank you for letting me share that with you.”

“Sure, sweetie. It does get better.” She smiles a little at him and nods her head. Then she reaches into her bag once more for a tablet and headphones. She rolls her neck, relaxes into her seat and closes her eyes.

Will flags down a flight attendant for a drink once they’re in the air. He’s certainly earned that much from making it through the airport without screaming. She’s expeditious with his request and passes Will his drink in front of his dozing seat mate. Will quietly nods his thanks. He takes a tentative sip, hampering the urge to knock back the measly serving size in one toss. He’s able to nurse the drink for about a half hour. As a reward Will signals for the flight attendant once more for another whiskey on the rocks even though he’s craving something more brazen in the flavor department. Like a bloody mary. Will can feel Brian turn in his seat to send him a scolding glance, as the flight attendant makes her way down the aisle, but they’re positioned in such a way that they can’t see one another. As a taunt, Will orders one last drink, ever thankful that his seat mate is such a sound sleeper and that the flight attendant couldn’t care less about his drinking habits. He cherishes this one as his thoughts stumble onto Hannibal as they are wont to do. However, given the public setting Will is currently in, he diverts from that well-worn path to something more benign, fly fishing.

The current of the water pushes against his rubber wader protected legs as he stands in the chest high quiet of the stream. The mellow yellow sun is low enough to hide behind the lush canopy of the trees on the other side of the verdant shore. A cool algae-tinged breeze rustles Will’s hair as he holds the fishing pole, waiting for a tug. A frustrating few minutes pass with no luck. Will reels in the line to examine his streamer. The red feathers are still intact, as well as the little black eye. He decides to try something different. Will presses the pad of this thumb against the barbed hook, drawing a ruby pip of blood. But it isn’t enough. Will presses harder, penetrating through the soft flesh until the triangle end of the hook is under his skin, knocking against his bone. Then Will jerks the hook upwards, impaling a chunk of meat from his thumb onto the end. He flicks his line back onto the water with its improved bait. The glassy surface starts to ripple as the current weaves around unseen things below. A headless bloated body bobs to the surface. Soon followed by the cheerless and cheekless head of Paul Momund.

“Voyez?” He asks without speaking.

The word is unfamiliar, but Will knows it all the same.

Vibrant blue and red fletching of an arrow breaches the torrents. As does the thigh that it shot through. Jeremy Olmstead. The wound man.

A gust of wind kidnaps the calm and throws the tree limbs into a frenzy, whipping them into each other forcefully. Velvet petals of yellow and pink daisies rain down, dotting the water like confetti. The air grows humid with the graveyard smell of freshly shoveled soil. There’s a soft thud against the back of Will’s legs. He turns slowly and looks down. The torso of a

woman floats peacefully atop the water. Her chest is cut open from top to bottom, revealing her empty ribcage. In her outstretched hands she holds her heart in benediction for him to take.

"See?" She asks without speaking.

Barbara Bowski. The woman from the daisy case.

"Who do I thank for this gift?" Will asks.

"He goes by many names." She replies.

"You already know." The river whispers.

An arrow slices through the air, striking the heart and sending it splashing into the water.

"I'll gather the meat and you start the fire." A voice calls out gaily to him.

Will doesn't need to turn to see who's speaking. He already knows.

Will wakes with a startled gasp. He grips the armrests to steady himself as he notices his tenting erection. He angles his body away from the still sleeping woman next to him. The plane starts to descend but that doesn't account for the sinking feeling Will has in the pit of his stomach.

The woman finally awakens and slowly begins preparing herself to exit the plane. She waits until nearly all the other passengers have left before getting up. Which suits Will just fine considering he's still feeling quite drunk.

Brian waits for Will at the airport gate, tapping his foot impatiently. He's back to not speaking to Will. They hurry to the car rental desk. The alcohol makes everything feel soft and blunt, the edges of the fluorescent lights don't stab into Will's temples and eyes and he's able to detach himself from the feelings of other's as he passes them. It all feels so pastel and hazy to Will, as if he's in a dream and none of this matters.

The change in Will's demeanor doesn't go unnoticed by Brian. But he waits until they are in the car before addressing it. He once again takes the initiative to drive them to the police station.

It's the stupid little smile on Will's face that sets him off.

"You better sober up right fucking quick. You've got twenty minutes before we get to the statey hq."

"Uff-da, yer sure are a wet blanket, aren'tcha? You know what I need, some tunes. Seeing how you got to pick last time, it's my turn now, don'tcha know." Will reaches forward to make his selection on the touch screen but it takes a few attempts to make proper contact.

"Some folks are born made to wave the flag. They're red, white and blue. And when the band plays hail to the chief, they point the cannon at you."

Brian grimaces.

“O-fer, that's quite the face yer pulling. Look like a lutefisk, if yer asking me.”

Brian doesn't respond. He doesn't want to be party to Will's games.

“Crapola, you don't like this song, do ya? I picked it just fer you.”

“Yeah, yeah. You're real funny. Get it out of your system now. Don't be doing that accent in there. Fucking hell, I can't believe this is happening right now.”

Brian lets Will have control of the music for the duration of the ride, shuffling through CCR's catalogue. The music is better than talking to him but not by much. Nausea roils in Will's stomach like oil in water with every lurching stop and sudden turn. He rests his head against the cool glass of the window as Brian navigates swiftly through the city.

They arrive at the station in less than twenty minutes. Brian once again chooses a parking spot as close to the door as possible. Will turns to open the car door when Brian stops him with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You really should have some water. Take a moment.” Brian hands a bottle of warm water from the console cupholder to Will.

“Fer Pete's sake, stop mothering me.” Will gets out of the car.

Brian waits until Will comes alongside the car to toss to him, unexpectedly, the flimsy plastic water bottle. Which Will fumbles. He leans down cautiously to retrieve it and takes a sip.

“Alright?” Brian asks as he sees Will waver while trying to stand tall.

Will glares at him and flips him off with his free hand. Will stumbles as he tries to step up onto the sidewalk. Brian clenches his jaw. They enter the station without fail and are escorted to a conference room where the mayor, governor, chief of state police and a couple troopers are already waiting. Will gives the group of mostly old white men a floppy salute.

Brian grabs Will by the elbow. “Whatever statement you’re trying to make, now is not the time.” He whispers to Will.

Will rolls his eyes.

“Good morning, sirs. I’m agent Brian Zeller and this is special field consultant Will Graham.”

“That’s all well and good but where is your superior? Jack Crawford. That’s the man I want to see.”

“He’ll be here shortly. In the meantime, if you’ll allow me,” Brian makes his way over to the podium at the front of the room and unpacks his bag, placing a laptop and a hard drive on the small space while the mostly empty bag gets placed on the floor, leaning against the podium. Brian connects his laptop to the projector and then plugs the hard drive into his laptop. He

brings up a slideshow, no doubt made by one of the interns. “Let’s go over what we have so far on the case to better assist the taskforce you’ll be putting together and calling into action tomorrow.”

“He’s a cannibal.” Will slurs, nodding his head knowingly while still leaning in the doorway.

“I beg your pardon?” The mayor questions.

“Excuse the fuck outta me, did I just hear cannibal? Here, in Minnesota? Get the fuck out.” The chief loudly asserts over the mayor.

“That's quite a leap to be making for five missing teenage girls. Bart here thought they're all runaways. Especially considering there's not a scrap of evidence,” Mack Fried, the mayor, says.

“Do you have a favorite meal?” Will blearily looks to Colonel Bart Shorter as he slowly stalks halfway into the conference room, just enough to block out Brian standing behind him.

“Course I do. What the hell kinda question is that? Hell, if that's all it takes to be a detective in the big leagues then sign me up!” Bart laughs heartily.

Will smiles smugly. “I bet the wife doesn't approve of it. So, as a treat, you like to stop on your way home from work and park somewhere secluded to enjoy it slowly. And then you clean up; have a sip of water, pop a mint, maybe even sanitize your hands before disposing of the evidence in some trash bin you pass on the way home.”

The room goes silent. Bart's mouth has fallen open while the governor, Jim Smalls, shifts in his durable plastic seat.

“Hmm. Now that would be quite impressive if I didn't know that some of my troopers here can be quite chatty.”

“Oh, it's not gossip. It's ancestral. We like to take what we eat back to the comfort of our homes to enjoy them in safety and without interruption.”

“I'm still not getting it,” Jim says.

“It's in the pattern. All similar looking, similar demographics. It's too much of a coincidence for them to all suddenly decide to get the fuck of out this town.”

Bart narrows his eyes in warning.

“But eating them? Why not have a cabin somewhere and he's keeping them for other nefarious purposes. Like a kiddie diddler.”

“That takes grooming, time to get these girls to trust him and there isn't any indication of them speaking to someone to set a meet up on their computers. No footage of them driving to a meet up. If it was a snatch, there might be a struggle with at least one of them. But there's nothing, no blood, no hair left behind. And he isn't vindictive, no communication with the

media. He isn't doing this to make a statement, it's purely for himself. And you'd have to admit that these girls look good enough to eat."

One of the troopers standing in the back leaves the conference room. Mack clears his throat.

"Alright, looks like we're going to have to send a few troopers over to the Chippewa encampment, rile up some suspects." The governor mainly states this to the chief.

Will staggers over to the group of men.

"Enlighten me, what makes you think our suspect is Chippewa?" He leans onto the table for support. Clear beads of sweat dot his brow.

"It's known that those folks get up to some shenanigans alone in the woods over thataways. We've had reports of missing dogs and cats, probably used in some cult bullshit barbeque."

"And this must offend you, given that you're a staunch vegetarian yourself."

"Eating some hot dogs off the grill is a little different than stealing someone's cat and basting it in teriyaki sauce, or whatever the shit they use is."

"Meat is meat," Will says.

One of the troopers sharply inhales.

"Are we going to have a problem here, son?" The chief looks to Brian, who's still standing slack jawed behind the podium.

"That depends. I don't work with racist assholes. I said cannibal and you assume he's not white. Why is that?"

Brian makes his way over to Will and grabs him by the shoulders. "Excuse us," he says as he leads Will out of the room.

"Goddamn it, Will!" He loudly whispers as a trooper slowly walks past them. He smiles tightly at her, waiting for her to be well enough away before continuing. "Jack is going to go through the roof when he gets here."

"Yeah, if he can even make it through the doors before they pounce on him thinking that he's going to rob the place or whatever it is they think people with his skin color do."

Brian sighs. "I get it, I really do. I don't like talking to these fuckers either. But we aren't doing this for them. We're doing it for Delilah Woodward, Alice Anderson, Rachel Winn, Sarah Olsen, Lauren Sorenson."

Will is taken aback that Brian remembered all of the victims' names. Maybe even a little impressed. He smiles lopsidedly at Brian.

"Straighten up, come on man," Brian says.

“You know, I think I'm about as straight as the line I could walk right now.”

“I don't need to know this.” Brian looks away from Will.

Will rolls his eyes while trying to move past Brian to get back in the conference room. But Brian puts both of his hands up to stop Will.

“No, no. You're not going back in there. Go wait out in the lobby. Better yet, wait in the car.”

“The fuck I will.” Will shoves into Brian with his shoulder as he tries to move Brian out of his way.

Brian swiftly blocks Will's entry with his forearm, pushing Will backwards so that Will stumbles. Brian sees him losing his footing and tries to catch him before his fall but he's too slow. Will lands squarely on his ass with a soft ooffph.

“Shit man, I didn't mean to. Here, let me help.” He extends a hand down to Will.

Will attempts to slap it away but misses. “I'm fine. I don't need your help.”

“Come on,” Brian says as he crouches to pull Will up by his arm.

Will manages to shove his arm away. Brian frustratingly doesn’t lose his balance and stays solidly in place. “I said I don't need your help.” Will gets up with a hand placed on the wall behind him for support. He wipes his hands off on his pants once he's up.

Brian also stands back up and reaches into his pocket for the car keys. He hands them to Will who snatches them with malice from his hand. Will turns from Brian to shamble his way out of the station and back to the car. The bright sun knocks into Will’s unprotected eyes uninvitedly. The sky is an unblemished deep blue, which Will takes personally. The car alarm sounds shrilling as Will presses the wrong button on the key fob. His panicked fingers swiftly press the correct button. Will sighs with the silence that surrounds him. As he shuts and locks the doors, he settles into the passenger’s seat, wondering where his water bottle is since he could really use some water right about now. Will tosses the keys into the cupholder in the middle console. He’s too tired to get out of the car to scavenge for the water. Instead, he crosses his arms over his chest while leaning back against the cool window which feels refreshing on his flushed skin. And closes his hurting eyes.

He awakes to Jack rapping against the window with a scornful look in his blazing eyes. Will blinks a few times to adjust to the light. He unlocks the doors before opening his door to talk to Jack.

“Now is not the time for beauty rest. Get in there.”

Will shakes his head. “I was disinvited.” His mouth feels hot and dry.

“What did you do?” Jack looks behind him in disbelief at Bev.

“You should probably leave your gun in the car, you too Bev. And go in with your hands raised. The Minnesota nice thing is just a myth, they aren't the most welcoming here,

don'tcha know."

"Motherfucker!" Jack's fist pounds the roof of the car. "You're officially on my shit list, Graham."

"Yeah, I know. Hey, have you met Brian's new girlfriend?"

"What does that have to do with this?" Jack's jaw is tight.

Will shrugs his shoulders. "If this little conference results in pushing this guy to abduct again, which is what you're hoping for, isn't it? And you send us back here, I have a hunch that his girlfriend, Erin is what she goes by, will conveniently show up."

"Who says I'm going to make the mistake of bringing you here again? And do I smell alcohol on your breath right now?" Jack's formidable figure blocks out the sun as he cages Will in the car with one arm on the open door as the other braces his knee while he leans down into Will's space.

"You need me, Jack. Even intoxicated, I'm still better at this than you are."

"Bev, get him out of my sight before I lose my composure." Jack straightens up to step away from the car and turns his back to Will.

"Let's go," she flicks her head to the car she just exited.

"Where are we going? The plane doesn't take off for another three hours?" Will slides his legs outside of the car.

"You're going back to the airport, where you're going to wait. And then you're going to go home until I call you again. You really fucked this up, Graham," Jack says to the space in front of him.

"Maybe I did." Will gets out of the car and shuts the door. "But the next victims, and trust me on this, he's going to leave quite the crime scene behind, their blood is on your hands." He pats Jack on the shoulder as he walks past him to the other car. He pauses for a moment before opening the door, staring over the roof of the car, daring Jack to look at him. The challenge goes unaccepted. Will opens the door and gets in the passenger's side.

Bev gives a short nod to Jack before getting back into the car. She quickly starts the engine and reverses out of the parking lot. She has to wait a good ten minutes before she's able to talk to Will.

"So, did you accomplish what you wanted to by pulling that stunt back there?" Her voice is strained, lacking the good humor their rapport usually has.

"I'll let you know when I know." The airy pastel calm of the alcohol is fading to the deep grey, stifling haze of anxiety.

"Will, seriously, what has gotten into you?" Her brow is heavy with concern.

“Oh, nothing Beverly. It's what I've decided to let out.” Will looks out his window while secretly gripping the underside of his seat as Bev merges into traffic.

“It's probably not my place to say this, but I'm going to anyway for your own good. Don't let your ego jeopardize your career and your relationships.”

Will raises a brow. “Relationships?” He huffs, mimicking sarcastic laughter. “I talk at students for a few hours a day and then go home to my dogs. Have you ever once invited me out for a drink?”

Bev grips the wheel. She quickly looks at Will and then back to the road. She’s much better at navigating under pressure than Brian.

“No. But,”

“No is a complete sentence.”

“Okay, I'll admit we haven't been the most welcoming. But I'm not even talking about our team. I mean Dr. Lecter. I don't think he'd entertain behavior like this. Based on what I know about him, he has a pretty solid standing in several prestigious social circles. And the way you're acting would be an embarrassment to him.”

“What an astute observation. I didn't know you were a behavioral analyst. You should let Jack know, maybe you can relieve me from this case.”

“Will,” Bev begins to say.

“May I also share an observation?” Will interrupts.

Bev bites her lip. “Yeah, okay.”

“You and the others never call me by my name. In fact, this is the first time I've heard you say my first name.”

“That's not true.”

“Sometimes it isn't in what people do that their inner most thoughts are revealed but it's in what they don't do, the negative space.”

Bev sighs, unsure of how to continue.

“You don't know Dr. Hannibal Lecter.” There's a gruff finality to his voice, thusly ending further conversation.

Bev nods her head, realizing that any comradery that she had with Will has now dissolved, fizzing away flatly like the alka seltzer tabs Jack throws into his water when he thinks no one is watching. She drives the rest of the way in silence without the use of the map app, she left in too much of a haste to set it up and relies on her memory to get back to the airport. Bev only makes one wrong turn that's quickly remedied. They go through the same arbitrary motions as before but in reverse. The silence persisting like stubborn frost in April. Will

would consider it a victory if his head weren't pounding so. The airport is easier to deal with this time around, especially since he doesn't want to give Bev the satisfaction of seeing him struggle. Will relies on building those forts he mentioned to Hannibal during one of their earlier therapy sessions to keep himself sheltered and unbothered. He finds a vending machine for two bottles of water while they wait to board their flight. Like magnets repulsed by one another, they are repelled to opposite ends of the terminal space. They wait. As time inches by, Jack and Brian don't show up. Will sees Bev check her phone, possibly meaning that they're taking a later flight to smooth over any feathers that he managed to ruffle. Will sits quietly, trying his best not to fidget against the outside pushing in on him with its many pinpricks of stimulus. He closes his eyes to think about the case at hand, turning over pages to search for something, anything to stop the inevitable. Just when he thinks he might be on to something, they are called to board.

His luck seems to be running thin. On the return flight his seat mate proves to be rather chatty so Will feigns sleep to get them to shut up which becomes an actual dreamless slumber. The rush of black water overwhelms him, dragging him under into blank unconsciousness. It's quite restful.

Evan isn't at his desk when they exit through the back of the Reagan airport. Will feels more disappointed than he would like to admit. His eager smiling face would have boosted his mood long enough to survive the ride back to the station with Bev. Things start to speed up now, with that high pitched fever dream quality, and before he realizes it, he's back in his car, more than halfway home. Will leaves the music off, preferring the silent darkness. The moon shyly peaks between tree branches to welcome him home. The sight makes the hairs on his forearms stand at attention in salute to their goddess.

Will parks his car next to Hannibal’s sleek sedan. The porch light has been considerately left on, glowing softly against the dark. The house looks cozy from the outside as it sits primly in the low hanging fog. Peaceful. For a fleeting moment Will considers that he doesn’t belong here, that this isn’t his house. That his place is in the dark, amongst the shadows of the water and the other shunned creatures. Then he remembers his earlier epiphany, albeit not confirmed as of yet, about Hannibal. He steadies his breath and gets out of the car. If Hannibal can live comfortably in the light, so can he.

Contrary to the last few hours of his day, the scene that Will comes home to is nothing short of romantic; Hannibal lounging in the tattered thrift store recliner by the defunct fireplace with the space heater glowing hotly. The dogs lay scattered at his feet, dozing calmly while Luna has situated herself at Hannibal’s side, placing her body protectively between him and the front door with an outstretched paw just barely touching one of those expensive loafers he wore back at the hotel in Louisiana. Will stills with bated breath as to not disturb this illusion of what his life could be like, surprised that the slamming door didn't already ruin what was waiting for him. He wants to be this moment. Bask in its happy luminescence. Hannibal continues silently reading, seemingly intent upon finishing whatever page he’s on but Will doesn’t mind since he needs time to sort out how to gracefully announce his presence and not shred this delicate moment woven in fragile lace. All thoughts of decorum fall dead in Will’s mind as Hannibal finishes reading, closes the book to tuck it between the arm of the chair and the seat cushion and looks to Will. There’s a radiance to his gaze as it settles upon Will, like moonlight coming through the clouds. It must be a trick of the light because his eyes glimmer

like freshly unearthed rubies as he smiles minutely at Will. But it isn't the look he's giving Will or the small smile that is his undoing. It's the way Hannibal uncrosses his leg from his knee and shifts his body towards Will as if he's an unopen invitation. The dim lighting still manages to shine against the black silk coordinate Hannibal wears, along with a decadent looking black silk house robe with red velvet lapels.

"Welcome home, Will," Hannibal says.

Hannibal's tone slides down Will's throat like thick honey. He struggles to swallow it with watering eyes. Home.

"Do I smell food?" Will manages to rasp out from his constricted throat.

Max suddenly stirs awake, smelling the air with his head lifted from a dog bed. He gets up too quickly, nails skidding on the floorboards as he bounds over to Will. He stuffs his wet nose into Will's palm and snuffles. Max's wildly thumping tail masks Will quietly clearing his throat as he pets Max's head. Soon enough the other dogs awaken with the knowledge that Will is home. Winston gets up from his blanket that he was sharing with Buster to try to claim the palm Max was sniffing. Harley starts digging at his dog bed while Ellie snaps at him to stop. Jack sneaks over to Harley and Ellie to steal back his favorite ball that Harley was sleeping with. While Buster remains asleep, blissfully unaware of all of the chaos. Luna sits up but stays by Hannibal's side, raising her eyes up to Hannibal as if to say, have some class.

Hannibal stays seated for the time being to allow the dogs their happy reunion with Will. He also does not want to risk injury to his attire during their free for all for Will's attention.

"I took the liberty of making a comforting meal. Considering the day you most likely had, I thought that something nutritious was in order. Not to mention that cooking must be the furthest thing from your mind." His voice is seductive like smoky incense, coiling in and around Will.

As much as he loves the dogs and appreciates how they tether him to societal norms, sometimes they feel like nothing more than endless fur covered and shedding responsibilities, always needing something. Right now, that something being his undivided attention when all he wants is to go to Hannibal and feel if that silk really is as luxurious as it looks for himself. They are slobbering, panting, manky obstacles, preventing him from fully enjoying this heart swelling golden moment.

"Even after I explicitly told you not to. I'm going to shower the day off me and then I'm going to make dinner. And you're going to eat it and fucking pretend like you like it."

Hannibal smirks for just a flash. "The food will keep for several days. We can enjoy it at a later date."

"Good," Will smartly replies.

As he turns to lumber up the stairs to shower, Hannibal rises from the threadbare recliner, making it look like a throne, robe billowing out behind him as he advances to Will. He stops

Will by gently grabbing his hand, pulling him back. He maneuvers to stand in front of Will, merely inches from Will's mouth. He leans forward and closes his eyes while inhaling.

“Drinking on the job? That's grounds for a reprimand.”

Will scoffs. “I've had enough of that today.”

“I imagine not by the means of which I plan to punish you.”

Blood pools hotly in Will's groin. He cataclysmically crashes his mouth against Hannibal's, inelegantly clacking their teeth together. Hannibal pulls back slightly, tasting Will's bottom lip while his hands grip Will's hips. He slows the pacing of their next kiss, savoring delaying Will’s gratification by keeping their bodies ever so slightly apart.

“Goddamn it, Hannibal. I need,” Will trails off as he tries to pull Hannibal flush against his own trembling body.

But Hannibal remains stubbornly exactly where he is.

“Shower first. Then dinner. And after that you’ll get your dessert.”

A reluctant huff of laughter escapes from Will. He can’t control the corner of his mouth from quirking up in a little smirk.

“Okay. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“There’s no place I’d rather be.”

Will rolls his eyes before moving away from Hannibal and hurrying up the stairs. Once he’s in the bathroom, Will sheds his clothes and shoes, turns on the showerhead and gets into the still cold stream to slow his arousal. He soaps up his hair first while trying not to notice the mold speckling the grout between the tiles which would trigger an anxiety spiral of all the little household things that should be done instead of allowing himself the enjoyment of carnal delights when he hasn't earned it. Will rinses his hair before efficiently sudsing the parts that matter the most. He chants, *doctor’s touch, doctor’s touch,* as he soaps his cock and ass. But all that does is make him think of Hannibal touching him, washing these intimate areas. Will ceases touching himself to turn the shower knob to colder. He finishes bathing in seven minutes flat. Will reaches for his towel, wrapping it around him as he steps out of the shower. He goes to the sink to brush his teeth while wishing that the mirror weren’t so steamy. He feels absolutely feral.

Will rummages through his still unpacked boxes for clothing, silently damning himself for not owning nicer things. He pulls on grey joggers and a white shirt, opting to skip the underwear. He feels his half hard dick bounce with every jaunty stair step back down to the living room to where Hannibal is taking command of his dogs. He has them lined up, sitting patiently for their nighttime treat. Hannibal must've let them out for last call while he was in the shower. Hannibal dismisses the hounds and looks to Will. Will inadvertently swallows as Hannibal’s eyes seize him. Like a man possessed he rushes to Hannibal, enveloping him in his arms to kiss him deeply.

Hannibal sighs into the kiss, moaning lightly at Will’s uncontained passion. But pulls away.

“It's rather uncivilized to have dessert before dinner.”

Will's eyes glower. “I'm not feeling very civilized at the moment.” He reaches forward, tugging Hannibal back to him by the waistband of his silk pants.

Hannibal moves willingly. His hands find their way around Will's waist as they kiss again. Will angles his next kiss for the corner of Hannibal’s mouth to trail another kiss at his cheek before biting his earlobe. Will sucks at Hannibal's throat as he slips a hand down the cool fabric to grab a handful of Hannibal’s stiff erection, eliciting a sharp hiss from him. Will moves his hand deftly along Hannibal’s shaft, the silk sliding deliciously against the bare skin of his member. His own body shivers. The silk feels heavenly in his palm.

“Is this how you want it, Will?” He pulls Will even closer, trapping his sliding hand between them.

Will's movement stills as their erections slot against one another. His hips thrust forward for the shock of friction he so desperately craves.

“Do you want to hurry things along or would you rather,” Hannibal lifts Will in one swift movement.

Will instinctively wraps his legs securely around Hannibal's waist as Hannibal walks to the recliner, carrying Will as if his weight is no burden to him. He places Will softly down on the ratty recliner.

“Allow me to take care of you,” he says, kneeling between Will’s legs.

Will sits dazed for a moment before shaking head. “Not here. Upstairs. I don't want to be interpreted.”

Hannibal nods solemnly before moving to pick Will up once more. Will shakes his head again.

"I can manage some stairs.”

Hannibal looks over Will’s flushed face and near panting mouth. The tight bulge in his pants throbs in time with his heartbeat. There’s a telltale dollop of damp on the front of his pants. Hannibal realizes that Will isn’t wearing anything under his sweatpants.

“After you. I will be up shortly,” Hannibal says with as much composure that he can manage. He stands and allows Will to pass by.

Will momentarily narrows his eyes in distrust as he gets up from the chair. He slowly walks to the staircase, frequently glancing back at Hannibal to try to surmise what he’s up to. Will ascends the stairs and goes to his room where he waits.

Hannibal enters the room shortly after Will, holding a roll of paper towels in one hand and a small label-less bottle in the other. He looks to Will as he closes the door with his foot behind him. Hannibal's eyes flick to a pillow still poking out from an open box. Hannibal glides towards Will, placing the items on the dresser next to him.

"Tell me Will, how do you want me?" Hannibal presses his body against Will's now trembling body.

Will is grateful for the wall behind him for support since his knees suddenly feel very weak. His bare feet no longer feel cold against the floorboards. Hannibal cants his mouth towards Will's ear, his warm breath sends shivers tumbling throughout Will's flushed skin.

"Do you want to take control of my body, using it as a vessel solely for your pleasure, dictating when I'm allowed my release? Does that fulfill your need of being listened to, of being taken seriously?"

Will closes his eyes and tilts his head closer to Hannibal's mouth wondering if it could be possible to fuck a voice. To choke it out of the diaphragm until it emerges from the throat like a splinter from under the skin. To keep squeezing and squeezing, only stopping to grab at the crimson rod rising up from the belly, feeling the words squirm on his palm like a fish's body as it thrashes against the treacherous air. Then to force it inside himself in the hopes that something merges. That the words stain the inside of his body. Maybe then he'll finally sound more interesting.

"Or would you rather, relax into my touch. Allow me to handle your frustrations. You haven't been taken care of in so long, haven't trusted someone to understand your needs, as you anticipate theirs. I can feel it. The desire to be wanted."

Will opens his eyes. He looks to his left to search for the moon outside his window. But she's being coy. Will then flicks his gaze to the right, to the mirror reflecting this wanton scene back to him. His mouth parts to inhale a shuddering breath. Hannibal's own eyes follow to where Will's stare is directed.

"Take off your clothes."

Hannibal takes a few steps back after his command, letting the robe slink off his shoulders to puddle at his feet. Will's waist juts forward at the loss of Hannibal's warm body pressed against his, creating a beautiful arch in his back. Hannibal's gaze drifts back to the mirror to admire the shape of Will's malleable body.

Will hesitates. The last time he was intimate with someone only the necessary articles of clothing were removed. Hannibal takes the lead, slowly unbuttoning his top before slipping his toned arms free, all the while looking fixedly into Will's eyes. The luxurious fabric pools around his still slippered feet which he promptly toes off. Hannibal hooks his thumbs behind the waistband of his pants and pulls them down. His half hard cock hangs heavily between the trunks of his thighs. Hannibal steps towards Will, leaving his clothing behind him like shed skin. Will backs himself wholly against the wall. He's nearly panting. Hannibal brings a soothing hand to the side of his blushed face.

“We can stop now. If this is too much we can go downstairs. You can make me dinner and tell me about your day. But you must tell me, Will. Please, find your words.”

Will tilts his head to kiss the palm of Hannibal's hand.

“I want this. I want you. Please, don't make me decide how right now. I,” he pauses, “I'm overwhelmed with the possibilities. I want your mouth to abuse as I fuck into it. I want you to be tender with me, slow and soft as you wrap your hand around my cock. I want it all. I just want to feel you.” His voice hiccups in his throat.

“And we'll have plenty of time to explore all of those options and many more. But for now,” Hannibal lifts the hem of Will's shirt, leaning down to plant a kiss on his stomach before standing back up and lifting the shirt completely over his head.

Hannibal places his hands on either side of Will's hips, sliding the tight-fitting joggers down, kneeling as he does so. Will's hands find Hannibal's shoulders as he steps out of his pants. He leans his head against the wall and closes his eyes.

Hannibal kisses the inside of Will’s thigh and then moves to the other to lavish it with the same attention. He works his way up Will’s leg until he reaches the underside of a testicle. Hannibal wraps his lips around the swollen mound, swirling his pointed tongue across the flesh. Will’s mouth falls open as one of his hands make their way to Hannibal’s head, he threads his fingers through Hannibal’s hair for purchase against these unmooring sensations. Hannibal directs his mouth to the base of Will’s heaving erection, lapping at the junction between Will’s supple cheeks.

“Ahhh,” Will gasps. His face contorts tightly for a moment, eyes wincing from strain at the corners.

Hannibal burrows deeper into Will, shouldering a thigh to gain better access. He flattens his tongue against the tight ring of muscle and licks wetly at the clenching entrance as a tease, not yet plunging his tongue into Will. Will’s free hand flies to his brow as his body starts to slacken. The noises coming from Hannibal sound so eerily similar to eating, as if he is making a meal of Will.

Will moans lowly as Hannibal continues to feast upon him. Will tenses his thighs against Hannibal’s frame in warning.

Hannibal relents his devotions, channeling them back to Will’s throbbing neglected cock by licking a broad stripe from root to weeping tip. Will’s hand falls from his brow and hangs uselessly at his side, clenching a rigid fist. Hannibal tastes Will’s precome with the smooth underside of his tongue as he gently pulls the foreskin away to suction his mouth around the reddened tip. Hannibal circles his tongue around the head before swallowing the entirety of Will’s cock, hitting the back of his throat. Will’s hand grips the roots of Hannibal’s hair with a pleasant stinging pressure. Hannibal breathes through his nose, holding Will steady by the backs of his quaking knees. Hannibal swallows the salty beads trickling down his throat, constricting the slender tube against Will’s cock.

“Ohh, oh, my god,” Will breathes.

Hannibal slides Will’s cock slowly out from his mouth, swirling his tongue along the way to ensure an even coating of wet. He removes one of his hands from the back of Will’s knee to firmly grip the base of Will’s cock, moving slightly up and down as he takes Will back into his mouth. Will forces himself to open his eyes and to look down upon Hannibal’s artful attentions. Hannibal feels he’s being watched so, on the next slide into his eager mouth he flicks his eyes up to meet Will’s dark and heavy-lidded gaze.

“Fuck,” Will moans. He looks away from Hannibal’s fiery depthless stare, the shared moment is too intense. His eyes wander back to the mirror, hips bucking forward at their own accord as Will watches Hannibal devour him. This should look animalistic, Hannibal hunched on the floor as he tends to Will’s baser needs. But somehow Hannibal manages to look elegant. His pose is strong and refined with the shadows exactly where they should be as if he has command over them. This could be a sculpture in a Greek museum. Will chokes as he tries to swallow, laughing a little to himself at the absurdity of it all. A possible cannibal is fellating him. He could bite down to tear a morsel of flesh for himself as sustenance.

A tortured moan escapes from Will’s lungs as he imagines Hannibal tearing into him, blood filling his mouth. He then shifts his posture, bringing his face up to meet Will’s own with blood-stained mouth and chin, smiling before eliminating the space between them for a hellish kiss.

Will’s hold on Hannibal’s hair clenches violently. His other hand unsticks itself from his side to grip the back of Hannibal’s neck. Hannibal hums delightfully around Will’s throbbing member, sending shockwaves rippling through Will’s taunt stomach. Will experimentally rolls his hips which results in Hannibal’s teeth lightly grazing the tender flesh. Will holds his breath in an attempt to quell the surging rush threatening to end this blissful moment.

“Not like this. Please not like this,” Will rasps.

Hannibal releases Will’s hard cock from his mouth and lowers his shoulder so that both of Will’s feet are rooted to the ground. Will lets go of Hannibal’s hair and the back of his neck, as Hannibal begins to stand up. He leans into Will’s body. Their erections crash against each other. They both gasp at the sensation. Hannibal presses his lips against Will’s closed mouth. Will tries to turn his head away on the second kiss but Hannibal grabs Will’s chin roughly, holding him in place for another chaste press against Will’s tightly closed lips. Frustrated with Will’s lacking performance, Hannibal coerces Will’s mouth open as he pulls his chin, aligning their lips and runs his velvet tongue along Will’s own. And Will can taste himself. The saline precome, his hormoned sweat and something else. The hidden, intimate spicy musk that feels so private, so secret. Will pushes against Hannibal, wanting to taste more. Their kisses heighten in tempo until Hannibal encloses his long-fingered hand around both of their cocks with the majority of the hold on Will and strokes.

Will freezes, resting his forehead against Hannibal’s damp brow, allowing the electrifying sensations to reverberate through his body. Hannibal reaches over to the dresser for the small bottle of lubricate with his free hand, cleverly opening the bottle single handedly. He drizzles the liquid over their lengths as well his own hand and the smell of sweet almond wafts lazily into the air between them. Will’s hands find their way to the firm swell of Hannibal’s cheeks,

grasping as a feeble attempt for balance from this eroding cliff. Will's hips rock back and forth as Hannibal glides his strong hand up and down both of their lengths. The lubricate adds a luscious slip as their skin touches with each stroke. Hannibal watches the fluttering in Will's lower stomach and stops his movements for a breath, keeping a firm grip at the base of their cocks before starting again. Will teeters dangerously on the edge of climax, sweat mixing with the lubricate, his mouth agape in silent agony or ecstasy, in moments like these the feelings are more mutual than not. Will moves his hands from Hannibal's muscled cheeks, trailing pressure up his back until they latch onto his shoulders, pulling Hannibal even closer against his body. Their hips move in tandem, seeking harder pressure, faster friction. There's a soft wet sound punctuating the room between breathy inhales and exhales. Beads of condensation dribble down the closed window. The room is too hot, Will's body feels too hot. He wishes he could shed more than just his clothes. Maybe leave his body behind and become something else entirely. The moist earthy smell clouding the room doesn't detract from the glorious feeling engulfing Will, making his nerves sing in a choir for no god. He wonders if he could live like this, forever writhing on the damp brink of collapse. His orgasm gathers itself, his thigh muscles twitching as he balls tighten, his stomach quivers as his cock erupts with his seed.

Hannibal leans away from Will ever so slightly to swipe some of the come with his fingertip. He brings his glistening finger to his mouth and sucks, eyes dark with delirious devotion. He dips his hand back down between them for another serving but this time he brings the offering to Will's lips, smearing his own fluids against his closed mouth. Will opens his mouth, inviting the finger inside so that it rests upon his tongue. And sucks, hollowing his cheeks with effort. Hannibal pulls his finger free from the depths of Will's mouth before swooping in for a kiss. He sucks at Will's tongue to wring the taste out. Will moans achingly at the oversensitivity. Hannibal continues undulating his hips, working for his own release. After several move thrusts, his body trembles as he climaxes with shuddering breaths, muttering something in a foreign tongue. They stand together, panting in the dark while little tremors of aftershocks ripple through their muscles. Will swallows before nestling his head into the crook between Hannibal's neck and shoulder. Hannibal reaches for the roll of paper towels and assiduously cleans the stringy smatterings from their stomachs.

"I, umm, I should go and clean myself up. I'll use the bathroom downstairs." Will, as gently as he can, presses his hands against Hannibal's chest to create space between them. There's a hysterical euphoria burning in his chest.

Hannibal moves back willingly, and watches Will gather his clothes from the floor. He pauses at the door as if he wants to say something before he leaves but the message goes unsaid. Hannibal tidies up the room, wiping at various drips and drops scattered on the floor, the smell of Will engulfing him in a heady bouquet with every twist and turn. He strides to the bathroom with the soiled paper towels in hand, throwing them away before he reluctantly wipes himself clean.

Will traverses the stairs with trembling knees, his numb hand grips the guiderail in vain. He staggers into the bathroom, swiftly flicking on the light and leaving the door open. He clutches at the edge of the sink as he looks himself over in the mirror. For the first time in a long time, he feels like he finally sees himself. Will smiles and sloppily cleans himself up.

Will exits the bathroom and navigates his kitchen with drowsy limbs, clumsy when forced into action. As exhibited by Will stubbing his toe against the doorframe, knocking his hip into one of the kitchen chairs and inadvertently slamming a cabinet door shut. Will manages to gather a pot, two bowls and two spoons. He finds a can of beef and barley soup and unceremoniously dumps the contents of the can into a pot and waits for it to heat up. This wasn't the plan. He wanted to dazzle Hannibal with his humble kitchen prowess. But his cottony soft sleep addled brain wants nothing to do with scheming an ambitious meal in its current state. He opens the bread box for four slices of semi stale bread for toast which he puts on another plate when it's done. Will hurriedly sets the table, adding a stick of butter and two butterknives to the setting. He takes two glasses from the drying rack, almost dropping one, and fills them with cold tap water. These too get added to the table. The soup seems sufficiently warm, so he slops a serving into a bowl for himself and another for Hannibal. Will tastes a spoonful and grimaces. Nonetheless, he brings the bowls to the table and sits.

The stairs announce Hannibal's return, creaking in delight as he uses them. Will nearly drops his spoon when Hannibal enters the room, wearing only the robe tied loosely around his waist, with the opening revealing plenty of pectorals and chest hair. He sits down on the chair, adjusting the robe casually, showing a fair amount of leg as he crosses an ankle to his knee.

"Comfortable?" Will asks.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'm still feeling rather hot. Putting on clothes seemed an unnecessary exercise in oppression." He looks down at the meal laid out before him with raised brows.

Will tries another spoonful. "This tastes nothing like the house smells," he says dejectedly.

Hannibal demurely nods while eating a spoonful.

Will lets his spoon rest in his bowl and crosses his arms while leaning back in his seat.

"What did you make anyway?"

Hannibal swallows and takes a sip of water. "Gumbo, with cornbread, dirty rice and collard greens."

Will raises his brows. "What's in the gumbo?"

"For protein, pork sausage, chicken and shrimp. For vegetables I went with celery, green peppers. I decided against okra due to its decisive mucilaginous nature, which if I'm being honest, I still have yet to master cooking well."

"Finally, something you aren't accomplished at. Although, I suppose cooking okra isn't considered much of an achilles' heel. But that's good for you since we all know what happened to Achilles."

"If I'm Achilles, then does that make you Patroclus?"

“That depends. Which one was hiding paramount secrets from the other?”

Hannibal inclines his head. “Everyone has secrets, Will.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” Will holds his gaze steady on Hannibal.

Hannibal’s hand silently reaches out for the butterknife with the little serrated edge, his thumb caresses the knife’s teeth like an old friend.

“A little quid pro quo? That didn’t seem to end well last time if you remember.”

“What if I go first this time?”

Hannibal nods his head. A cast shadows the mirth in his eyes.

“I like to follow men home from the bar sometimes. Stalking them. Knowing full well that I could kill them and get away with it. But I don’t. And then I come home and masturbate to fantasies about killing them.”

Hannibal readjusts his leg to fully cross them under the table. He flexes his thigh against the swelling length trapped between his muscles. Hannibal inhales against the lightheaded feeling behind his eyes.

“Now we’re even,” he says lightly.

“What?” Will balks.

“You know about my past and the men I killed,” Hannibal doesn’t get to finish his sentence.

“Hardly.”

Hannibal bites his lip and inhales exhaustively.

“I’m at a loss, Will. What do you want me to say?”

Will scoffs. “Oh, now you’re feigning ignorance when last time we were sat in similar circumstances you were, what did you say?” Will pauses for effect, “That you were ready to lay the world at my feet.”

Hannibal struggles to swallow against the rapid pulse thrumming in his neck.

Will constricts his arms tighter around his chest. He didn’t want to do it this way. He wanted to do some more research, cross reference dates and places before jumping to conclusions. Before possibly ruining things between them. But Will has never been good with nice things.

“I know,” he says.

Hannibal stares blankly at Will.

“I know,” he repeats and sighs shakily.

Hannibal frowns and tsks. “And what’s to be done about that?” His hand grips the handle of the butterknife as Will begins to grin.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Will makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

CW/TW- sexual content, allusion to violence/cannibalism

*honestly this is just 3,000 words of smut, as a treat for pride and a balm for the horrible court decision last week.

this chapter was initially going to be very long but considering the second half focuses on hobbs, who's mo was teenaged girls, i thought it would best to split them to allow readers to skip the next chapter without missing/spoiling round two of hannibal and will enjoying dinner.

be well and remember that whatever comes next, we are resilient

Chapter 21

The malicious grin pulling at Will's mouth lights up that feral part of his brain, spotlighting several bloody scenarios. Many of which are sexual in nature. Will blames this on his currently blissed out headspace from probably one of the best, if not the best, sexual experiences of his life. And he wants to crush it. To step on this little bird singing sweetly in his chest, filling his lungs with blossoms of joy because why should someone as broken as him be allowed to have this?

But Hannibal isn't making this easy for him. Will passively watches Hannibal practically petting the butter knife as if it were a loyal old dog with the resigned look of someone who feels quite dejected with this ending. There's a deep blue feeling pressing its hand over Will's mouth and nose, stifling his breathing while another hand pushes against his chest over his heart. He isn't sure if this feeling is entirely his.

“What do you think should be done about it?” Will manages to ask with what little breath is still trapped in his lungs.

“Do you believe in god, Will?” Hannibal forces himself to look at Will.

Will shakes his head while avoiding looking directly at Hannibal. “I gave up on the idea of someone coming to my rescue a long time ago. You can only have your prayers go unanswered for so long before you understand there’s no one on the other end of the line.” His breath quakes in his chest, nerves alight with the options of fight or flight. He can’t freeze, that would mean death. He’s seen what Hannibal is capable of, the beauty in death, it certainly has its charms, but Will still has so much left to do, so much to explore. He can’t die. Not yet.

Hannibal’s hand stills, resting on the handle of the knife. “Surely, then you must subscribe to the idea of good versus evil?”

Will huffs a strangled chuckle. “There is no bad, there is no good, only the scars that we give each other. I think what I believe is more akin to nothing. We come from nothing and then return to nothing. There is no point, no purpose. Things just happen.”

“But you take your work so seriously? You choose it for a reason?” Fine lines knit around Hannibal’s brow in dismay.

“It just happened that way.” Will shrugs.

“I wouldn’t have thought you to be a nihilist.” Hannibal’s body is still rigidly on the edge of his seat, legs angled away from the table for easy escape.

“You really want to talk philosophy right now? After all that’s happened, this is what you fixate on, semantics?”

“Come now, you care about what happens to those college girls. You said that when you find him, you’re going to kill him with a bullet for each girl he had taken. There was no one in the room besides me, no audience for you to perform for. You were being honest.”

“Why are you trying to push me into a pair of moral dignity pants? I’m getting the feeling that you want me to be the one that catches the Ripper. Do you want me to arrest you, Hannibal?” Will finally relaxes a little, releasing his arms from tightly squeezing his chest to rest on elbows on the table.

Hannibal smirks. “Wouldn’t you have to call Uncle Jack? They didn’t issue you a real badge, let alone a gun and handcuffs.”

“Oh, trust me, I could manage.” Will’s voice roughens at the thought of restraining Hannibal.

“Tell me, Will, how would you manage me?” Hannibal slowly blinks.

The atmosphere between them stirs with galvanizing jolts that stands the hair on Will’s forearms, he feels it deep in his belly and even the tip of his already hardening member.

“I have rope and I know how to tie sturdy knots, fisherman knots. I could keep you restrained until someone with authority arrives.” Will didn’t think that another option would be to fuck Hannibal. And yet here we are, refractory period be damned.

“Show me,” Hannibal removes his hand from the butter knife.

Will raises his brows. He hesitates, watching Hannibal’s face for any indication of trickery. He pushes his chair back from the table, almost flinching at the loud scraping as if it would ignite this charge between them, bursting into flames that will consume their bodies. Now that would be a gratifying way to die, in the throws of passion, sweat slicked body and panting mouth, hunting for release before his heart gives up the ghost living inside him to the underworld where it belongs.

Will slowly rounds the table to stand in front of Hannibal. He looks down upon Hannibal and holds out his hand.

"Give me the sash." His voice is gruff, not at all like himself but feeling more like himself than ever.

Hannibal unties the slack bow while keeping his eyes locked on Will's burning gaze. The robe falls open as Hannibal whisks the sash from its loops. He readjusts himself on the chair to spread his legs wider, unashamed of his nudity and swelling member. He holds out the thin black silk sash to Will, hoping that Will doesn't notice the slight tremor in his wrist.

Which Will doesn't notice as he plucks the silk from Hannibal's grasp, not actively at least because he's bedeviled by the disappointment that he won't be tying Hannibal up in something red.

"Stand," Will says.

Hannibal responds in kind and starts to slip out of the robe to leave it behind on the chair like a veil.

"No, no, keep the robe on."

The flicker isn't only in Hannibal's eyes, it also ripples out across his chest and stomach.

"Please," Will says.

Hannibal shrugs back into the robe to conform to Will's wishes, positioning it into place with a roll of his shoulders.

"Step forward and hold out your wrists, palms up."

The entire house hushes around them as Hannibal dutifully follows Will's instruction, entranced by the wild spark in his heavy-lidded eyes and the lowly scrap of his voice.

Will's hands dart out to roughly grab Hannibal's wrists, pulling him even closer as he kicks the chair out from behind Hannibal. The sudden clatter wakes the dogs, one yelps in fear, a couple scatter to another room while a few of the braver slink forward to investigate. Will's focus never leaves Hannibal's awe-stricken face. Instead, he merely cants his head to the side to tsk commandingly at brood, who in turn settle back to their respective beds. Will releases Hannibal's slender wrists from his grasp to loop the silk in his hands. Hannibal remains fixed in his position with his palms up for Will's offering. Will leisurely lowers his hands down between them, touching the cool silk against the heated skin of Hannibal's member, sending a shiver trilling in Hannibal's thighs. Hannibal closes his eyes and exhales slowly as his cock twitches from the brush of the fabric. Will winds the silk around the base of Hannibal's cock, once, twice, thrice, before tugging upwards to wrap the free ends around Hannibal's wrists which Will adjusts so that they are flush. Hannibal reopens his eyes and clasps his hands together while Will securely knots the ends together.

"Undress me," Will says.

Hannibal kneels, ever so eager to release the erection outlined in the confines of Will's soft grey joggers. There's a neatness to his actions as he works his fingertips under Will's waistband before pulling forward and then down to his ankles, almost as if he isn't bound or like he's done this before. That treacherous thorn of a thought nags at Will. How many have there been before him? After him? Will steps out of the pants pooling around his feet and kicks them behind himself as the feeling of jealousy and possession curdles abyssally within his belly.

Will brings a hand to the side of Hannibal's face to caress his sharp cheek as he scans his typically inscrutable guise which now has softened to something akin to reverence. Will closes his eyes against the swelling sensation seizing his breathing, filling him with a silent glory. His vision swarms with pin pricks of black and red once he reopens them. Will sighs.

"You're going to be the death of me, Hannibal."

Hannibal leans into Will's palm to nudge his lips onto his skin, lightly kissing there.

“And for that you will thank me.”

Will’s mouth parts as his hand falls from Hannibal’s face. His cock throbs, pulsing in time with his thudding heart, pushing out a pearl of precome from the tip of his redden cockhead.

“Stand,” Will commands with hushed voice.

Hannibal gracefully rises from his knees and steps closer to Will. The heat between their bodies could keep a village warm or roast a suckling pig. There’s a moment before Will strikes in which he sees their future together, the skies red with their radiance and dark heavy clouds on the horizon that rain down crimson screams, smearing the air with them like a blood-soaked hand wiping its mouth after a wood smoked feast. It’s beautiful.

Will roughly seizes Hannibal by the shoulder, spinning him around while knocking his legs closer together as he presses against Hannibal’s solid frame, draping himself across Hannibal’s back and forcing him to bend. The table groans under their weight as Hannibal shifts his forearms to gain space from the sharp table’s edge against the rigid but fragile flesh of his fully engorged cock. The motion tests the tensile strength of the silk wrapped about his member like a maypole. His hips roll against the luxurious, almost agonizing sensation. He bites down on his bottom lip as he sighs and pulls again. Will regains his posture, removing himself from Hannibal’s back to strip off his t-shirt which he tosses near his pants, wanting nothing more than skin on skin. He pauses to take in the sight of Hannibal bent over the table while their dinner congeals in the bowls. He extends a hand, skimming his fingertips along the hem of the robe, trailing his touch across Hannibal’s exposed skin as he lifts the garment up to his shoulder blades. Will admires the sturdy tremble in Hannibal’s thighs, the flex of his glutes as the air rushes his bare skin.

The slide between Hannibal’s thighs has enough friction to border on hurt. He eyes the butter on the table briefly considering its usefulness but ultimately decides against it.

Will grips Hannibal’s hip with one hand as the other keeps the robe bunched up his back, fucking into those firm thighs, making sure to nudge Hannibal’s swollen testicles with every drag and push. A sharp hiss escapes Will’s mouth. He stills his movements to catch his breath.

“Olive oil was the lubricant of choice for the Greeks and will do for us given this impromptu circumstance. Tell me to wait and I will.”

Will takes a step back from Hannibal, removing his hands from his hip as he does so.

“Stay,” Will says.

He walks back to the kitchen feeling as if his head will brush the ceiling with his new godlike height.

Hannibal acquiesces. He takes this time to move his still bound hands to keep the blood flowing through his chilled fingers, inadvertently jerking himself with the silk binding. The feeling is sublime. A balance between tight pressure and gentle tease. Hannibal wonders where Will learned this skill. And what else lays coiled in that beautiful mind of his.

The glass bottle of olive oil clatters on the table and the lid goes skidding off onto the floor. The scent of sunshine warmed grass hazes behind Hannibal. There’s a glug as Will pours the oil into his palm to gloss his cock with. Will sighs with his head thrown back, almost losing himself in the act of lubrication. He stops to pour more oil into his shining palm which he bastes Hannibal’s thighs with. But Will doesn’t stop there. He reaches between Hannibal’s legs to torment his neglected and straining cock with his oil warmed hand from base to tip. Hannibal rocks back, seeking Will’s body to lean against but Will is not within reach.

“Patience,” Will coaxes with his hand still wrapped around Hannibal’s cock, stroking up and down, slowly.

Will steps outside of Hannibal’s legs to cage him inside his body as he slides his cock back between those well-muscled legs. Will groans at the smooth glide. He places a hand on the table for stability, forcing Hannibal into a deeper bend, while his other works Hannibal’s hard member. Will nestles his face into the crock of Hannibal’s tense shoulder to nuzzle against his ear, breathing in their co-mingled sweat and the smell of sex still residing on his skin. Will grunts from his thrusts, licking and biting Hannibal’s ear as water spills out from the glasses to soak the table. This Will is entirely different from the pleading and gasping boy he pleasured upstairs. Hannibal never predicted this character shift, what Will could become. And the time for exploration is over now. Disappointment wanes his erection.

“Is this what you intended, Will? To use me before taking my freedom?” Hannibal pants as Will continues driving into him.

“For once in your goddamned life shut up.”

“Then shut me up. Be the merciless creature that you so crave, delight in your brutality before we part ways.”

When Will pauses his movements, regret floods Hannibal’s senses in an icy creep over his body, flooding to a rush when Will removes his body from his own. Will’s cock slides out from between Hannibal’s thighs as he takes a step back. Will turns Hannibal to face him with a solemn look in his weary eyes as he sedately undoes the bindings. The silk gently falls to the floor. The overhead lights sear Hannibal’s eyes as they blare their whiteness to keep the shadows at bay.

“Take me with you,” Will says.

Hannibal searches Will’s face for the lie.

Will presses his body against Hannibal’s own, digging his fingertips into his hips as he rests his face against the side of Hannibal’s neck.

“We could disappear together,” Will continues saying into Hannibal’s warm skin like a prayer.

“Please,” Will sighs as he snakes a hand down between them to slot his cock back between Hannibal’s thighs.

Hannibal leans back to perch on the edge of the table while squeezing his legs together, pulsing them in time with Will’s thrusts. Little gasps and moans pepper Hannibal’s ear as he

encourages Will to keep snapping his hips with his hand on Will's lower back. Will's other hand that isn't numbly gripping the table's edge for support, much like Hannibal's own hand, finds its way to Hannibal's aching and hard cock, stroking with a firm hold from base to tip, almost in rhythm with his ramming motions. Their fingers touch. Hannibal moves his pinkie and ring finger to overlap Will's tense digits. Will tilts his head away from Hannibal's neck, placing his lips upon Hannibal's parted mouth, slipping his tongue inside to rub against Hannibal's tongue. They moan together as Will's movements become erratic and disjointed, the dishes clatter on the table from the jolting. Will comes first with a shuddering spasm, his hand only pauses for a moment from wresting Hannibal's stiff cock at the base, pressing against his inflamed testicles as his hand flexes. Which is enough for Hannibal to climax, groaning against Will's mouth.

They remain entwined as their fevered sweat chills their bodies. In this moment Hannibal knows all too well that Will also will be the death of him. Will could offer poison from the palm of his hand and Hannibal would dip his head to lap coolly at the baneful drink.

"We could leave tonight." Will clicks his tongue. "But the dogs. What do you want to do about the dogs? They really aren't made for air travel and,"

Hannibal interrupts Will.

"We'll talk it through over dinner." He still hasn't had enough time to recover his breath.

"I think I need a shower first," Will says.

"Shower first. Then dinner, a real dinner."

Will untangles his limbs from Hannibal to better look him in the eyes.

"I'll tidy up in the meantime. Go." That resigned mask is firmly back in place on Hannibal's face.

Will nods once before turning away from Hannibal to shower upstairs for the second time that night. Once Will is gone, Hannibal goes to the sink to wet a paper towel and wipes himself off as best as he can before going back to pluck the discarded and now likely stained sash from the floor. He threads it through the loops and adjusts the robe to secure the garment close. He goes about the dinner table, tossing the stale toast and sad looking soup into the trash since they aren't even fit to give to the dogs and then rinses the bowls, spoons and lets the pot soak in the sink. The olive oil cap is plucked from the floor and rinsed off before topping off the bottle back on the counter. Hannibal rights the kicked over chair and looks over the scene to ensure he hasn't missed anything. He drinks nearly all of his water that is left in his glass before he wipes the table down with the napkins Will set out. Next, he goes to the fridge for the several containers of the food he made earlier to layer them into each bowl. Dirty rice at the bottom to soak up the gumbo with the collard greens at the top. Each bowl gets microwaved as does a couple pieces of cornbread wrapped in a damp paper towel on a plate to keep them moist. He tops off their water glasses and sits.

By the time Will bounds down the stairs Hannibal is already seated with a fully set table.

"Wow," Will gasps. "Can you control the weather too?" Will asks as he sits across from Hannibal.

Hannibal creases his brow.

"Obviously, you have some sort of alliance with time because," Will looks over the table. He gulps down half of his water before gorging himself on the meal in front of him.

"This is really fucking good. Do you cook like this all the time? Even when it's only you?" There's a childlike glee to Will.

"No," Hannibal says.

The spoon freezes midair as the gleeful feeling gets knocked out of Will's stomach. He swallows.

"No?" He asks even though he knows full well what Hannibal is saying no to.

“You aren’t ready. Not yet.”

Will’s face curls inwards, like a tiny balled up fist in anger. He puts the spoon down.

“You’re punishing me,” he says.

“I’m forewarning you.”

Will shakes his head. “What happens now?” The perverse feeling of a reserved déjà vu taunts Will, pulling him down from his great height.

“We finish our meal. I would like a shower if you’ll let me. Then I could either stay the evening or I can go home. That choice is yours.”

“Stay. Please stay.” Will knows what has to be done.

Hannibal nods his head with an omniscient leer about his eyes. He knows two things to be true. The next time he sees Will someone will have died by his hand. And that Will is going to murder Brian Zeller.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The Hobbs family enjoys a quintessential breakfast; eggs, pancakes, venison scrapple while watching the Mayor's call to action on the local news until the divine intervention of Garret's work phone commands his presence at the nearby university to fix another broken heater.

Jack leaves Bev in charge for another disastrous trip to Minnesota so that he can chase a new lead on Miriam's whereabouts.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the pause in posting. This chapter was a beast to write and went through several moltings before its final form. There is a delicate balance of achieving a scene without depicting the gruesome murder of a young woman in a gratuitous manner. Hopefully I accomplished that.
I am grateful to you, dear readers, for sticking around while I spin this yarn at a leisurely pace. But I do want to assure you that I will not be abandoning this fic. The last chapters are currently in various stages of draft awaiting revisions and fluffings which I will try to post in a more timely fashion.

CW/TW
suspected incest/pedophilia (does not actually occur, the dude is just weird)
gruesome/gory imagery
murder (3) with 1 brutal attempted murder via stabbing
implied cannibalism
sexual content
cancer treatment

Chapter 22

“Honey, I don’t wanna hear about any of that tragic business with those missing girls. Turn it off while we eat, please.” Louise, in her daisy print apron over her lavender scrubs, turns from the spitting skillet to her husband already sitting at the table with the top of his work clothes shrugged down to his waist.

“Mom, they aren’t girls. They’re like my age. I’m an adult.” Abby sulks into her chair. She has yet to change out of her pajama pant set with the teddy bears dotted around the waffled fabric.

“I know Abby. Trust me I know,” Louise says as she plates the rest of the venison scrapple that she knows damn well no one but Garret is going to eat.

“Garret? Are you listening to me?” She pats the shining oil from the meat with a paper towel before bringing the plate to the table, placing it closer to her husband. From this distance she notices how grimy his white tshirt has gotten. She wishes he’d pull the coveralls all the way up to eat.

“This is important Louise; these are all schools Abby applied to. Maybe now she’ll really think over my advice about taking a year off. She could live at the cabin and write a really cool paper about independent ecological systems. There’s some neat fungi in the woods thataways. That’ll surely set her apart from other applicants. There’s no need to rush into more school.” Garret looks pointedly at his daughter, staring hard to get her to look at him.

Abby feels the intent look of her father but continues ripping her paper napkin into tiny pieces. She’d rather not see his eyes right now.

“After weeks of diligent police work, we are now asking the community for additional assistance. We have been working closely with the FBI in order to narrow down leads. This is where you can help us. We are looking for a white male, in his forties to fifties. He has a daughter that is between the ages of seventeen through twenty. She looks similar to the other young women that have gone missing.”

“See mom, young women, not girls.” Abby stops picking at her napkin to plop another pancake onto her plate.

“He likes to hunt and or fish and may have a cabin up north for such activities,” the Mayor says.

The crowd begins to murmur loudly.

“I know, he sounds like a regular guy, maybe even like your neighbor. But that’s just it with crimes like these. Sometimes the perp goes to your church and even brings a hot dish on Sundays for the youth service.” Mack pauses to let the crowd settle.

“He has some type of contracting job, one where he travels and it’s expected of him to be unreachable for hours at a time.”

"Holy buckets, he sounds like you, honey. They sure are casting a wide net with that there profile of theirs.” Her hand grips the back of her chair that she has yet to sit down on.

Abby pushes her plate away suddenly looking very pale.

Louise frowns as she crosses her arms over her chest. “I told you this was too much for so early in the day.” She says through clenched teeth.

Garrett looks to his precious daughter. “Still up to going to the cabin with me? You haven’t been in so long and there are things that I want to show you, teach you before you leave. The blood moon is tonight. It’s going to be something really special.”

Abby shakes her head while a hand massages at a sharp pain in her chest. “I’m really not feeling well. I think I’m going to go to my room. Mom, is that okay? Or do I have to go to school since I’m not going to the cabin?”

“You go right ahead an rest up.” Louise smiles at her daughter with worried eyes.

Garret shakes his head in disapproval. He forks two slabs of venison scrapple onto his plate and begins quickly eating. Louise watches how ill-mannered her husband becomes while he eats. The sounds sour her stomach. She continues standing at the table.

“Why don’t we go to the cabin?”

“What? Why?” Particles of food fly from his mouth as he speaks.

“Nothing too long. Just a night or two, maybe give Abby some space. We haven’t been at the cabin together in, oh a year or so now. It could be nice. I think I’ve still got those Prince cassettes around here somewhere for the ride.”

“Ohh jeez, Louise. I don’t know. Abby might invite that cake eater friend of hers over.”

“Cripes Gary you can’t blame the child just cause her parents own the most popular skating rink in town. She’s a good kid. Got sisu that one.”

“She’s just so blonde.” Garret sneers.

Louise gapes at her husband as he continues ticking off all the things he doesn’t like about teenaged Marissa. All of them physical.

“She could honestly stand to lose some fat and gain some muscle. And why is her hair so long? It looks unkempt. She would benefit from a cut, maybe the same length Abby has. And why did she have to bleach her hair? It was a perfectly good color before.”

“Like Abby’s.” Louise adds.

“Exactly, like Abby’s.” Garret agrees while fervently nodding his head.

Any icy wash of panic rushes across Louise’s chest. She’ll talk to Abby once Garrett is gone. She’ll force herself to ask about what she saw yesterday even though they’ll both be uncomfortable. But she needs to know why Garret had his hand around her daughter’s neck in a tender caress as he murmured how beautiful her body has become, how womanly. In fact, ever since Abby turned sixteen Garret has become increasingly touchy, an age most

fathers would be uncomfortable with even hugging their daughters, let alone coaxing her to sit on his knee while they watch tv.

Garret's work phone buzzes on the table. His eyes widen in glee as he reaches for the bulky brick of a phone with the sturdy yellow and black case.

"Uff da, another service order for that university. The damn heaters over there are near kaput." Garret wipes the runny egg from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand before pushing his chair away from the table. "Well, since I'm going to schlep all the way up north, I think I'll just stay at the cabin for the weekend."

Louise furrows her brow.

"Alone."

"But I was going to unthaw the chicken for your favorite, broasted chicken, tonight?"

Garret stares blankly at his wife.

"No, yeah. Sure, honey," Louise says. She turns away from her husband and starts to tidy up the kitchen.

He stares at the back of his wife while she rinses the food smears from the pans and wipes the dried pancake batter from the counter. If he tries hard enough, he can see his daughter in his wife, similar frame and nose. She cut her hair into some ugly pixie thing and dyed it a brassy blonde color thinking that it made her look younger. If anything, it makes her look foolish. But even a broken clock is right twice a day.

"You really think that profile sounds like me?"

Louise turns to look over her shoulder and shudders. She was expecting Garret to be still seated at the table, not hovering behind her with that look on his face, the haunted one she's been seeing more frequently this last year.

She recovers quickly with a light but false laugh. "Cripes Gary, you gave me a fright. Still light on your feet even after all these years." Louise turns the faucet off and shifts around to fully face her husband.

"You didn't answer my question." He has yet to blink.

Her forehead creases with concern. She wipes her wet hands on the bottom of her apron.

"I mean, he sounds like he could be any of our friends or neighbors. Hell, eighty percent of the township fits that dang profile."

Louise feels Garret's steady stare bore into her, looking through her as if she isn't a person anymore but rather a hunk of raw flesh, a carcass with a panicked heart rattling in her chest. The lingering smells of cooked meat and oil curl her stomach. A repugnant thought worms its way into her mind, would a chunk of her taste any different than the venison scrapple Garret was just eating? Against her better judgement she reaches for his hand. He doesn't even flinch when she touches him. His hand is heated and limp in her own.

"What's wrong? Is there something going on?" Louise keeps her voice steady.

"It's not safe out there. You're pushing her away and I won't be able to protect her." Garret finally blinks at the wash of tears filming over his eyes.

"Abby? Abby isn't safe from who? Gary, you're not making sense." The usually cheery kitchen filled with the golden sunlight suddenly feels like a hot hand over her nose and mouth stifling her breathing.

She lets his hand fall from her grip.

“It’ll be okay. I’m making sure of it.” The smile he gives her is ghoulish enough to make the hair on her arms stand at attention. The muscles in her calves twitch, begging her to run, to get away from him.

Garret unties the coverall sleeves from his waist and slips into them before buttoning up. Louise used to joke that his getup reminded her of that masked fella who stalked those teens. It doesn’t feel as funny now to think about it.

He abruptly turns away from Louise to hurry to the front door and then outside to his van. Louise remains frozen in place even after she hears his van speed away. She collects herself before she finishes tidying the kitchen. All the while, silently rehearsing what she’s going to say to her daughter. She calls the dental office to let them know that she won’t be in today.

Urgency surges through Garret’s veins as his shaking hands open his already packed overnight bag to scan the items inside. His work phone rings shrilly.

“Go for Hobbs.”

“Hey, Hobbs, it’s Daniel. Boss says you need to swing by and pick me up for the uni job.” Daniel quickly tries to swallow a swig of too hot coffee.

“No can-do buckaroo. I’m taking a half day and then heading to the cabin for some hunting.” He puts a smile in his voice.

“Oh yeah? Taking the wife for a little r-and-r?”

“Now how’s a man supposed to get some r-and-r with a nagging wife around?” He forces a throaty chuckle which Daniel matches.

“No, yeah, I get it. You think you can handle that heater on your own?” Daniel blows on his coffee.

“You mean without you there to hand me my tools and breathe on the side of my face?”

Daniel laughs again. “Ope, you got me there! Hey, maybe you’ll get lucky and it’ll be some pretty little thing’s room and she could spot you your tools.”

Garret closes his eyes and sighs as a serene calm washes over his face.

“Louise always said I have the devil’s luck,” Garret says.

“I’m just hearing this now? Not fair. Slots. You, me, next weekend. No nagging wives. And you’re buying the first round of beers as penance for me shadowing Tim today.”

“You betcha.” Garret ends the call with his eyes still closed as he tilts his head back into the sunlight, relishing the cold chill from the air around him.

Today feels different. The air swirls around him in a protective circle, even the sun feels different, gentler against his eyelids. Garret knows he’s going to be shown something important. Something life changing. He reopens his eyes and adjusts his posture before closing the back doors to his van and making his way around to the driver’s side door. Garret hoists himself up to slide into his seat wincing at the dull ache in his knee that he woke up with one morning a few weeks ago that decided to stick around ever since. It amazes him how the human body breaks down. Joints grind against bone and bone starts to fracture. The organs decay and rot inside until they fail. We’re all just walking elk waiting for harvest. He starts the engine and smiles to himself as he checks the time with the relief of knowing that this will all be over soon. Eight twenty-two are the heavenly numbers for success when achieving your goals.

Louise knocks lightly against Abby's closed door with an ear perked at the silent noises within her daughter's bedroom.

"Abby? Abby, is it alright if I come in?" She turns the doorhandle and tentatively inches the door open to peek inside both to allow her daughter time and to quell the nausea of invading Abby's privacy, something she prides herself on respecting.

She's never rummaged through Abby's things or her phone, never pried for details about crushes. This would be the second time she's entered her daughter's room without Abby opening the door. The first time was last summer when Abby got mushrooms from Marissa and ended up getting too high. Louise heard Abby quietly crying while muttering something about being rotten on the inside. She opened the door to find Abby laying in the middle of the room on the floor with both hands clasping her ears. Louise braces herself as she goes inside Abby's room.

Abby stands in front of her bed with her phone in her hands, seemingly mesmerized by what she's reading. On her bed are various baubles of jewelry in careful piles.

"That's a pretty necklace," Louise says while reaching for the sparkly star.

"Don't touch it," Abby seethes.

Louise looks to her daughter, taking in her tear-stained, ruddy cheeks and pink rimmed eyes.

"It's evidence," Abby says.

Louise inhales. "Evidence?"

Abby tucks a chunk of hair behind her ear before reaching the cell phone out to her mother. Louise doesn't take the phone from her daughter.

Louise shakes her head as the tears well, thankfully blurring the screen in front of her. "No," she whispers.

Abby glares before taking charge of the situation. She points at each item as she announces a name, a necklace, a bracelet, there's a ring, a barrette in the shape of a moose, a tie dyed blue scrunchie. "Delilah Woodward, Alice Anderson, Rachel Winn, Sarah Olsen, Lauren Sorenson." She turns the phone screen back to her mother to show her the missing photos which feature the items on Abby's bed.

"Dad gave them to me. They all either applied to or were going to the colleges I was interested in."

Louise bites her lip. "Daniel?"

Abby frowns. "It's dad. I know it's dad." Abby exhales to keep from sobbing.

"Okay, okay. What do we do? Should we pack some things? Or should I call that tip hotline first? We certainly have to get changed, you're still in your jam-jams for cripes sake. We're going to need a lawyer or do we get one appointed to us?" Louise brings her hand to her mouth to chew on her thumb as her thoughts spiral.

"We should talk first." Abby sits on her bed and raises her brows at her mother.

Louise hesitates. She doesn't want to touch any of the jewelry. Abby brashly swipes everything to the floor. Louise sits tentatively on the bed as if it could swallow her up and deposit her into the pits of hell.

Abby crosses an ankle to her knee and begins shaking her foot furiously, a habit that drives Louise up the wall. But they're got bigger issues now besides manners and lady-like behavior. Louise passively watches Abby's foot bounce while feeling already exhausted at what's to come, how their lives will change. Her daughter's voice coaxes her attention back to the matter at hand.

“Has dad ever talked to you about the angels?” Abby’s eyes are wide with a silent plea for affirmation.

Garret crouches in front of the groaning heater with a wrench in hand. The bolt to the access panel is rusted stuck. Garret twists again, well aware that he’ll have to replace the bolts as thin flecks of metal cascade onto the floor.

“Hello?” An unsure voice calls into the room.

Garret drops the wrench to the floor and gasps. He nearly trips over his cooler bag from getting up too quickly, he wipes his sweating palms on his coveralls.

“Hiya! I’m Mr. Hobbs. Your RA put in a work order for your unit here?” Garret motions to the now hissing heater behind him as he steps around his tool bag.

The young woman sighs in relief as she looks over the several bags strewn about her floor. “Oh yeah. That thing’s been acting up for weeks now. Have you figured it out yet?” She walks into the room and slings her backpack on her bed.

Garret watches her. How her nimble movements are like Abby’s own loose-limbed gait. She flicks her brown hair over her shoulder and looks back at him with bored eyes.

“Not yet. But you’re probably going home for the weekend anyways?”

She scrunches her nose. “Not really.” She perches on the edge of her bed in a stream of sunlight, highlighting a smattering of freckles across her nose like deer tracks on a path.

“Interesting,” Garret says.

She crosses her arms over her small chest. “Is it?”

“Not really,” Garret replies boredly and smirks.

She grins a little and rolls her eyes.

“Anywhoo, it’s going to get loud. You better get on to class.”

She unzips her bag. “I actually have a break right now. Is it okay if I stay? I’ll keep out of the way.”

“Sure, sure. But would you mind closing the door for me? I wouldn’t want to disturb the others.”

“Okay.” She shrugs her shoulders and slides off the bed. She crosses the short distance to close the door.

Garret times his blow to the back of her head as the door closes to mask the sound. Her body falls gracefully into his waiting arms.

The doorhandle turns just as Garret is placing the still warm liver into a zippered food storage bag. He pauses putting the plastic baggie into the cooler at his knee to look up at the young woman standing stock still in the doorway.

“Dayna?” She gasps with watering eyes at the fetid smell snaking its way over to her.

In a mad blur, Garret drops the baggie onto the floor in favor of his hunting knife and launches himself at her, pulling her inside the room by her slender throat. He swiftly slams the door behind her as he clamps a sticky, bloodied hand over her mouth.

"Don't scream." His eyes are a placid still pool of calm.

Her head bumps the door she's pressed up against as she nods eagerly, sending tears streaming down her face. Garret removes his hand and steps back, tilting his head to take her in. Her dirty blonde hair parted in the middle is a few shades lighter than Abby's and several inches shorter. But given the convenient circumstances she'll satisfy his hunger just fine.

"Uff da. It *is* my lucky day." He lunges forward and plunges the knife into her soft stomach, relishing that little moment when the skin resists the sharp tip of the blade before giving in to the penetration as the flesh parts itself for him. A warm sigh of air ghosts over Garret's hand as it leaves the confines of her belly. Her heated blood sends chills up Garret's forearm as it spills onto his skin. Her brows knit together in pain and confusion as her eyes search his face. One of her hands grabs for his elbow while the other clasps his hand that's holding the knife. Her body starts to sag to the floor.

"No, no, not there." Garret gathers her in his arms as he drags her over to the center of the room where his tools are. And where Dayna lays torn open.

The girl starts to whimper as she looks to her lifeless friend next to her.

"Shhh, none of that nonsense. You are a gift. But gifts all have their price."

Under perfect circumstances he would wait until she stops breathing before he starts. But this isn't how it usually goes. Not to mention that this isn't his usual choice in location. The cabin has everything that he needs, a table, bone saws, a meat hook, buckets, pots and pans, privacy. But time has a way of shouldering its way into getting what it wants because judging by her writhing he thinks that he nicked her stomach and her intestine. Which is perplexing given how the intestines are constantly wriggling around like worms in the belly. It's quite serendipitous that he cut them.

The knife slices her thin cotton shirt almost as easily as her flesh. Garret leans down to get a better look inside when he notices that her hair smells like summer strawberries. It's one of Abby's favorite scents.

As he butchers her still tepid and twitching body Garret realizes that her insides are the same as the other one. In fact, if he were to guess which liver came from which girl, well he'd be darned if he could. And if he can't tell the difference then that *thing,* he sees lurking in the dark corner of the room can't either. He only wants to eat. Garret chuckles lightly to himself as he packs the cooler. All this trouble of finding someone similar to Abby to fool that creature was for naught. He could've saved himself all this hassle. Those angels really do work in mysterious ways.

Will isn't exactly sure how they ended up like this, not that he is complaining but he does wonder why two out of the three times they've been intimate it's been in the kitchen. Maybe there's something to that, with Hannibal being a cannibal and all that entails. He focuses on how clean the countertop looks to distract himself from the pleasure blossoming deep within his belly. He wonders when Hannibal found the time to clean up. Will remembers that he had a drink and waited on the couch while Hannibal showered. Then he woke up to the sounds of breakfast being made. As far as Will knows Hannibal didn't sleep last night.

Will pushes back against Hannibal's hand to lessen the strain on his forearms bracing his weight against the countertop. His boxers and sweatpants are pooled around his ankles in such a way that if he wants to feel Hannibal deeper, he'll have to bend forward and spread his knees. Will swallows thickly and does just that, spreads his quaking knees against the cabinet door which rattles with each push and pull from Hannibal. A rush of heat unfurls up from his neck, to coil behind his ear before finally flooding his cheeks as he fights against the internal struggle of how dirty and wrong it is being fingered in the kitchen by a man no less. His father certainly wouldn't approve. In fact, Will knows precisely the word he would be calling Will right now if he knew what was happening. And if he could read Will's mind about what he wants Hannibal to do to him next well, he'd be rolling in his grave. There's sweat beading around his hairline which sure enough trickles down to his tightly shut eyes. Rather than swiping at the sting that managed to seep in and risk losing his balance, Will brings his arms together to rest his head in his hands. The sudden shift causes Hannibal's finger to slide all the way inside Will. Will bites the meaty flesh of his forearm instead of crying out. Hannibal pauses his playful thrusting to let Will adjust.

“How long has it been since another person has explored your body with the sole purpose of bringing you pleasure?” Hannibal’s hand is still.

Will clenches that tight ring of muscle to suck Hannibal in deeper. He pushes back against Hannibal’s palm to try to nudge him to move. An insolent huff puffs from Will’s parted lips once he realizes that Hannibal demands to be answered.

“Are we including this because,” Will’s sass is cut short as Hannibal crooks his finger just so. Will gasps wetly against his arm.

“Do you touch yourself like this?” Hannibal keeps swirling and crooking his finger inside Will.

“Not lately.” Will doesn’t feel like going into the details of how he experimented as a teen with his fingers before moving onto slender and long vegetables with condoms slipped over their waxy surfaces. How slowly but surely his father put two and two together and gave Will a whooping to remember both for wasting food and for the sexual deviancy. Now all these years later he gets the urge, the agonizing need to do it again after meeting Hannibal. But he isn’t as flexible as he once was and trying to find a comfortable position resulted in a muscle spasm deep in his neck and a frustrated cock.

“I can tell,” Hannibal whispers like smoke.

Will inhales sharply in his embarrassment at being known so intimately.

“You feel so warm inside, Will. And tight. I can feel you clench around me as you become more aroused.” Hannibal flexes his finger again to brush against those delightfully hidden bundles of nerves.

“Oh fuck,” Will gasps and then inhales sharply.

“Someday it will be my cock buried deep inside of you instead of this.” Hannibal thrusts slowly while curling his finger at precisely the right moment to make Will’s thighs tremble.

Will wasn’t sure when they started this that he would be able to come without Hannibal stroking his cock. How delicious it is to be proven wrong.

“I,” Will starts to say.

“I can hear the apprehension in your voice.” Hannibal quickens the pace. “Which is why I want to show you how pleasurable it can be.” Hannibal wraps the fingers of his free hand deftly around Will’s achingly throbbing member. The sweet smelling homemade lubricate adds a sinful slip to Hannibal’s tugging.

Will feels his orgasm gathering itself from the soles of his feet to the tingling on his scalp. Little yelps and gasps are pulled from his mouth by the crook of Hannibal’s finger and the twist of his wrist. The feeling is nothing short of magical.

“I,” Will swallows and moans, “don’t understand.” His thoughts are a torrent in his fevered mind.

“I want you to fuck me, Will, in whichever way you choose. I will get on my hands and knees on the floor like a loyal dog, for you, as you pound ruthlessly into me. I will lay on my back with my knees pressed to my chest to feel you deeper. I will,” a cell phone rings from the other room nearly shattering the moment.

But Will is already coming. All sounds and color blot from his mind as his orgasm explodes in him like a chorus of fireworks. This is dangerous. Addictive, even. His limbs feel loose and warm, if the counter weren’t here, he’d melt into a heap, much like his clothes are, onto the floor in all his bare assed, extinguished glory.

He feels a phone slip on his sweat slick skin as it presses against the side of his face. He tries to catch his stumbling breath and gather his scattered thoughts as they begin to regain meaning before he speaks.

“Yeah?” He nearly pants as his tingling fingers grasp his phone.

“Christ Graham every time I call you. You know what, never mind. Pack a bag and get your ass to the airport asap. We’ve got a couple of solid leads from the tip lines that match the work the desk riders pulled together and the pd wants us there for interviews.”

Will hears the faucet fill a glass which is then placed in front of him. He rolls his neck and shoulders as he stands up from leaning against the counter.

“I’ll be sure to be on my best behavior. Gotta impress the new babysitter.” Will gulps down some of the cool water to quell the sudden lightheadedness he feels from standing up too quickly. He turns around to smirk at Hannibal only to see that he’s alone in the kitchen with his pants still around his ankles. The image tickles his brain a little.

“I don’t see what’s so funny. And I don’t hear packing. And no, Dr. Bloom won’t be there, she’s already booked for the day. She’ll try her best to join us when there’s a good enough reason for her to be there.”

Will nestles the phone against his shoulder to free up his other hand to pull his pants up. He’ll deal with the mess on his belly and the cabinet doors later.

“Please tell me you’re putting me with Katz this time.” His voice falters as he shimmies into his pants.

“No, I need Katz to,” a notification cuts into Jack’s sentence. “I might be late. Katz is in charge.” Jack abruptly disconnects the call.

Jack stares at his phone with wide unblinking eyes at the text message sent from Miriam's phone.

The deer are running again

Are you?

Because I am

"Bella?" Jack calls out.

She's still fastening an earring when she goes to him from their bedroom to the living room.

"What is it?" She asks.

"Do you think Lamont could take you after all? There's this,"

"Work. Right. Well, at least you tried." She sighs while walking to her purse slung on the back of one of the kitchen chairs to get her phone.

It's the smile on her face when Lamont responds to her text that worries Jack more than the infusion appointment. But he can't risk losing Miriam. Not again. He reads over the message sent from the burner phone that he purchased for her when she was just a trainee and he had her doing things that shouldn't have been asked of a trainee. Things that ultimately lead to her kidnapping and disappearance. But not her death. She isn't dead. He can finally shrug off that guilt that's been burdening him like a heavy cloak for the last year.

Bella raises a penciled-on brow at her husband unexpectedly kissing her cheek before rushing to the door.

"Text me about how it goes. I'll call you when I can. Oh, and maybe save me a cookie this time." He doesn't look back at his wife. He knows the myth and how it'll be his undoing.

Bella sighs. She takes her time walking over to her favorite wing chair in the living room. As she sits and waits for Lamont to drive her to her appointment, she hopes he'll bring those delightful macadamia nut cookies with the caramel and chocolate chunks in them this time. The oatmeal ones were too bland while the other ones were just sweet enough to coat her tongue from the copper penny taste the chemo always leaves in her mouth.

Jack sits in his car for a moment with his hand still grasping his keys. He has yet to turn the ignition because he doesn't know where he's supposed to go or what the hell he's supposed to do. He calls Katz while en route to the deer run.

"Katz," she answers promptly.

"You're taking lead on this thing. Keep Graham and Zeller together. Price needs to stay behind. You can handle the cabin on your own."

Bev hesitates before asking quietly, "is it that bad with Prurnell?"

Jack closes his eyes for a beat as he damns himself for leaving his wife to deal with this insidious cancer on her own. Well, not alone. Lamont will be there. Most likely with cookies. And his charming smile. And his linebacker shoulders. Perfect to cry on.

"I don't want to have this discussion now. Just handle it. Everything will run like we discussed during the phone briefing this morning with Zeller. I'm just taking your training wheels off this time."

Bev clears her throat. "Got it."

“You fucking better Katz because I won’t be there if you scrape your knee or cause a pile up.” Jack disconnects the call.

He grips the steering wheel as he presses down a little harder on the gas pedal. The revving of the engine almost drones out the hammering of his heart. Almost.

Bev sits in silence for several minutes. She feels the heated glare from Brian sat across from her. She finally looks up at him with his heavy furrowed brow once she knows how to say what needs to be said to him.

“Well, that was a quick call. No time for speaker phone, huh? What did he say?” There’s an edge to his tone. Anger.

“Crawford isn’t coming with us. He left me in charge.”

Brian smirks and leans back in his seat as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Look, besides him not being there everything is the same.” She keeps her tone amiable. Besides the rumor of Brian being Jack’s golden boy slotted for his position when he retires, he’s also known for his sudden volcanic eruptions of temper.

He stares blankly at her and shrugs his shoulders.

Bev scoffs. “Really?” She hoped that Brian was capable of multitasking texting his girlfriend and listening to Jack. But you know what they say about hoping.

“I kinda stopped listening once he said I was stuck with Graham, again. I just hope that whatever it is that he does finally makes an appearance this time because he really fucked us the last time with the mayor.”

“It’s good practice for him.”

“Practice? He isn’t one of us, Bev. He’s a goddamned teacher. And where are teachers supposed to be? In the classroom talking at kids not interviewing family members of potential suspects.”

Bev catches Brian’s emphasis on potential suspects.

“This is a solid lead.”

Brian rolls his eyes.

“She said some real weird stuff to the local pd. And she also described several items that match the mps belongings.” Bev is starting to lose patience.

“So, we’re going all the way back to icy bumble fuck Minnesota because some bored housewife is getting cheated on?” Brian tilts his chair back to balance it on two legs like some rebellious teen agitating his exhausted teacher.

“Sure, could be an affair, but the daughter looks like his mo and he fits the profile so it’s worth looking into. The locals are still trying to locate the other lead, Daniel Brummer.”

“And he’s a lead because?”

Bev smiles sarcastically. “Where were all these questions when Crawford was briefing us?”

Brian smiles back just as smartly. “Maybe he explained it better. You’re making me all confused.”

“Three out of the five mps had work orders contracted by Anthony Abbott Heating and Cooling. Hobbs and Brummer are supposed to be on a work order for St. Thomas but neither can be located on the grounds at this time.” Bev wants to do something with her hands to quell her frustration and there’s a cuticle just begging to be picked at, but she resists. Instead, she allows herself to look away from Brian to assess her packed bags next to her feet. Which makes Brian do the same thing to his bags under the table. Bev is thankful for a reprieve from his scolding stare.

“Did the locals check the room that had the work order?” Brian asks.

“Yeah.” She opens the folder to scan for the names. “Room 456, Dan Holder and Mike Healy. The RA for that floor says he only saw one man and his depiction fit Hobbs.”

Brian nods his head. “So, if I’m with Graham at Hobbs’ place then that puts you?”

Bev looks blankly at Brian for being questioned. “Hobbs has a cabin about four hours north of his home that’s where I’ll be. Bodies are kinda thin, but this is the best info they’ve had since this started so they want to make a go of it, even if it’s just for the media coverage.”

“What does that mean, bodies are thin?”

“Jesus christ were you even here this morning? The department is split between going to the cabin and going to Brummer’s residence as well as St. Thomas and the HC company.”

Brian shrugs his shoulders.

“It means it’s just you and Graham at the Hobbs house.”

Brian laughs while looking at the ceiling.

“Just until the neighboring county can get some people to back you up. There’s some behind the scenes politics at play here that I don’t want to push. Listen,” Bev relaxes her posture to make Brian feel more at ease, “word has it you made a good impression with them the other day. They trust you enough to conduct the interview alone, that should count for something, right?”

“But I won’t be alone, will I?”

“I know you guys don’t get along but make it fucking work. It’s your job and this is bigger than you. Those people are depending on us to put this guy away.” Bev closes the folder. She waits for a snarky comment from Brian or for the legs on his chair to give out. Neither happens. Bev gets up from the table, grabs her bags and leaves the room to head to the airport.

Brian waits until the door closes behind her before slamming his fists down on the table in a show of outrage of Jack choosing Bev over him and putting him with Graham yet again. He reaches for his phone to quickly share his grievances with Erin before he has to meet Graham at the airport.

The tires skip on the pitted road as Brian hastily takes the next turn as indicated on the map. Will winces his eyes in silent protest at the reckless driving.

“Turns out an additional RA saw Hobbs with his kit and asked him to look at another heater issue for a different floor, room 722, occupants Dayna Latimer and Paula Cohen. It’s a fucking mess in there. No sexual trauma, trace evidence on the bodies match metal shavings from the rusted heater. Hopefully, we’ll get a match to his tools and whatever is at his cabin.” Bev’s voice sounds thin coming from the car’s speakers.

There’s a resounding boom and splintering.

“Oh my god,” Bev whispers at the sight before her.

The line goes dead.

In a rare moment of truce, Will and Brian exchange worried glances.

“Kill the lights, siren too,” Will says through clenched teeth as Brian hugs the curb at another bend in the road.

“What?” Brian never takes his eyes off the road; he only tilts his head in Will’s direction.

Will would roll his eyes if movement didn’t send pressured spikes of pain to jab dully at his skull. He reaches for the switch box between them, the local pd insisted they take their new behemoth of a squad car, to snap the tact lights and the howler off.

“Come on man.”

“You’re alerting this entire sleepy neighborhood that we’re coming. Some retiree might get curious and play telephone. Maybe that retiree is chummy with Hobbs.”

“It’s protocol,” Brian says with deflated shoulders.

“Fuck protocol. This isn’t a textbook.” With squinted eyes Will scans the various suburban houses for curtain pulling or blind peeping.

“Fucking pop an asprin or something. Handle your shit.”

“Handle my shit?” Will repeats incredulously.

“You’re hungover Will, anyone with eyes or a nose can tell. Which isn’t a good enough excuse to miss the briefing this morning. Bev and I were both there, bags packed and ready.”

“Briefing? What time did Crawford have this briefing?”

Zeller grimaces knowing full well that he just fucking fumbled. “Eight. We got notified at seven to pack for at least an overnight.”

Will scoffs. “I didn’t get notified until after eight thirty and that was only to tell me to pack because the locals wanted our assistance for two leads.”

Brian chews at his lip while he mulls over why Crawford seems to be purposely putting Graham in a pressure cooker with the lid tightly closed.

Will continues scanning the houses for discreet peepers. But the woman in 578 isn’t discreet at all, she boldly opens her front door and steps outside to gawk disapprovingly at the menacing squad car speeding down her street. She clutches her robe around her frail bird-boned frame. Will watches the woman in the sideview mirror shuffle back inside once they make their final turn onto Hobbs’ street.

“You better step on it,” Will says.

The car lurches forward as Brian presses down on the gas pedal.

The phone is ringing in the kitchen as Louise pats her daughter’s knee. The front door opens but doesn’t close.

Abby’s lip trembles as her breath quickens. Louise gently shushes her.

“Gary? Is that you?” She gets up from the bed and motions for her daughter to stay put.

Louise quietly closes the door behind her before she pads up the hall in her tattered slipper clogs with the little snowflakes on them to the front door. She passes the kitchen where the phone is still diligently ringing for her attention. Louise has half a thought about who could be calling when she sees that the front door is wide open. A chilled breeze invites itself inside her home. Louise wraps her arms around herself as she tentatively inches forward on her scuffed soled slippers. She cranes her neck to peer outside where she sees Garret's truck parked hurriedly and diagonally on their lawn. The driver's side door is still open. But Garret isn't anywhere in sight.

"Gary?" Worry rings her voice like coffee stains on a countertop.

She walks backwards, just as afraid to close the door as she is to turn her back to it, into the kitchen.

"They know," Garret says.

Louise gasps while hugging herself tighter. Her head whips towards her husband's voice to where he stands in front of the sink staring out the window. One hand grips the counter's edge while the other hand hangs at his side gripping a sloppily wiped hunting knife.

"I made a mistake. And they know," he says. He turns away from the window to look at his wife. His face nearly crumbles into a sob that he manages to swallow down.

Louise nods her head. "It'll be okay," she says.

His empty hand slams against the counter. "How? They're going to take her away!" There's an ugliness to the emotion twisting and pulling his face.

Louise doesn't know this man standing in her kitchen, but he certainly isn't her husband of twenty years. It's the smell surrounding him that's most concerning. A sweet, cloying smell that reminds Louise of visiting her great oma in hospice. She doesn't consider going to him

to offer her comfort due to the simple fact that she can't move at all. She has yet to notice the dried blood staining his coveralls that could easily be mistaken for grease.

"I'm sorry that you can't come with us." He raises his arm to point the knife at her. And when he takes a step forward Louise makes a choice which she'll never know if it was the right one to make.

It is.

She runs.

Slippers sliding on the cold wooden floor, losing one as she grips the doorframe to propel herself forward towards the still open front door. She can feel Garret at her back, the bulky mass of his body like an unwanted shadow. She's reaching, straining for the outside and the harsh light of day. Her face winces in pain as the knife slices down her back. The police car pulling into the driveway restores Louise's confidence as she regains her footing to get outside, to get him away from Abby.

Louise feels the warm sun on her face like a kiss on the cheek. But she's pulled away from its sympathetic embrace by a strong hand on her shoulder. There's a searing pain in her lower back and a spreading warmth down the backs of her legs. She's embarrassed by the possibility that she pissed herself from fear. Louise sees the men get out of the large cop car. Slowly. For pete's sake, why are they moving so slow? She feels several stabs to her back in quick succession before she's shoved to the cold, hard stone that she insisted on for the porch. She wishes she kept her apron on to keep the wet leaf debris from staining her scrubs, this lavender set is her favorite. The door slams behind her. One of the men runs to her and crouches to be at her level while the other, the one with the glasses, is already opening the door and going inside her home. He has a gun. Good heavens he has a gun. Why aren't they wearing police uniforms? She finds this concerning, but they are her only hope for Abby.

"Abby. You have to. Save her from him." Louise manages to say to the one wearing too much cologne before giving into the dark tunnel of pain swarming her vision. Her nausea feels better once she closes her eyes. In fact, she feels quite at peace with this whole mess as she rests for a moment with her fists still clenched.

Abby hears a scuffle in the kitchen as she presses her ear against her closed bedroom door. She cautiously inches the door open, pausing at each interval. But caution is tossed aside as she throws her door open once she hears her mother shriek. Abby bolts to the kitchen only to find it empty. She edges quietly to the front door just as her father shoves her mother outside and slams the door shut.

"Dad?" She whimpers. Her mouth has that dry acid battery taste and feels sticky. She wipes her nose with the back of her sleeve.

He promptly turns from the door to face her, forgetting to set the locks in place. His face is pale and sweat slicked. His wide, empty eyes crinkle at the edges as he smiles at her, a ghoulish grin with too many sharp teeth. His front is painted with blood in various stages of drying, some splotches are bright red and wet while others look stiff and rusted. He motions for her to come to him with the hand that isn't holding the knife. But she doesn't move. Garret drops his head and sighs before he charges at her just as the front door is opening.

With the devil's luck and time on his side, Garret spirits his daughter away to the kitchen before they are seen by the man coming into their home.

"Garret Jacob Hobbs. Drop the knife and come out with your hands up." A stern voice commands.

Abby is already crying. Her father does his best to console her as he nestles his cheek into the crook of her neck, inhaling her sweet summer strawberry shampoo as he murmurs into her ear that it'll all be okay. Her body convulses against his with the knife resting loosely at her throat as his other arm embraces her by her waist.

Will enters the kitchen with the gun trained on Hobbs. There's a dull ache in his shoulder reminding him of the missing muscle there. He adjusts his stance for proficiency purposes.

"Let her go," Will says.

Garret shakes his head moving Abby's body along with his own. His eyes drift to the sink and then to the yellow clock with the lemons hanging above the widow. He closes his eyes in relief.

"It's time," he whispers with a small sad smile. He stabs her in a fast frenzy thrice in the stomach and then raises the knife to her throat.

Abby is stunned from the sudden violence from a father that never so much as raised his voice to her in all these years. Her body slouches on its own accord from the attack, trying to slip from her father's grip while also protecting her wounds. It provides Will enough clearance to take the shot. He looks to Abby first to signal her to get down. She rallies enough strength to shove back against her father to gain some space to drop to her knees. Will squeezes the trigger eight times into Garret's torso in a patterned spray that feels distantly familiar while his last conversation with Hannibal replays in his mind. *Take me with you. No, you aren't ready.*

Will still has yet to lower his gun even though Garret has sunken to the floor. He hears Brian's heavy footsteps crash behind him. Will smells the bloodied hand pulling at his shoulder before he feels it.

"What did you do!" Brian shouts.

He rips the gun from Will's hand and puts the safety catch on before placing it on the nearby counter. He kneels to check on Abby who now lays curled up on her side surrounded by a shimmering pool of blood. Her lips have a blue cast to them.

"She'll be okay. He had a knife. She's going to be okay." Will stammers.

He crouches down next to Brian to help with the bleeding while they wait for the EMTs to arrive. He desperately tries to ignore the excited flitting of butterflies in his belly that sing to him. He took a life today. He took a life today and it feels glorious.

"See?" Garret rasps.

Will's head jerks up at the voice.

"See?" Garret repeats. He stares into Will like he knows him.

Will steadily reaches a hand out for Brian's holstered gun as he keeps his eyes locked on Garret.

"Fucking more pressure, Graham!" Brian yells.

Will looks back to the task at bloodied hand and then looks back to Garret once his hands are assiduously pressing where they have been directed to.

Garret Jacob Hobbs' body is slumped lifelessly against the kitchen cabinets. His eyes are blessedly closed. The fresh blood seeping through his clothes takes the shape of a rack of antlers. An eight point.

Will still feels as though he is being watched from the darkest corners of the kitchen by some great nameless entity that will no doubt follow him home and slink its way into his thoughts and dreams, looming behind every step he takes. A shadow.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Will accompanies Abby to the hospital while Bev makes a startling discovery at the Hobb's cabin. Jack goes to look for Miriam at their usual meeting spot without realizing he's being watched from none other than Freddie Lounds. Meanwhile, Hannibal goes to check on Miriam with disastrous results.

Chapter Notes

Hello kind readers and welcome back to this story! Thank you for your understanding while I took a prolonged break. Life just be life-ing sometimes, ya know?

Warnings for this chapter include; graphic depiction of crime scenes/murders of young women, racism, misogyny, attempted animal abuse (don't worry it isn't any of Will's dogs) mention of drug abuse/overdose and there is a character death this chapter

Also, have you ever looked up how angels are actually described in the bible? That shit is terrifying. I recommend having a gander at those renditions as well as looking up Kate Clark, a taxidermy artist.

Sweet dreams

Chapter 23

Will doesn't want to be holding the limp and sweaty hand that's placed in his but it's easier to comply than to shake her off and have to deal with the pointed looks from the two EMTs that smell vaguely like cheap weed. He adjusts his glasses with his free hand even though it does nothing to vanquish the thumb print of blood from his line of sight. Still, ever so thankful that he found these glasses in desperation at the airport while they waited for their flight to be announced for boarding. The comfort that they provided against the glaring lights and the drone of too loud conversations was priceless. Even more so when stepping over that woman with the fan of blood pooled around her like wings. With the glasses angled so just, her wide, pleading eyes were bracketed out from his view. Will wishes he had the wherewithal to slide his glasses down the bridge of his nose before locking eyes with Hobbs as he lay dying on the

kitchen floor. Will doesn't know what came over him when he threw his glasses away. It was impulsive, impractical and most importantly a waste of money. Slipping these new ones into his pocket did give him a little thrill though taking him back to when he was a kid palming packs of gum in the hopes of sharing and making friends. Little did he know that it would take more than a stick of gum to rook kids into hanging out with bayou trailer trash.

He doesn't want to be here, in this speeding caravan of despair and panic. He wants to be back in the kitchen alone with Garrett and his shadow. There's the faint coppery tang of blood in his mouth and he isn't sure to whom it belongs. The two EMTs bustle around the narrow space to keep Abby stable enough to make it to the hospital. It's impressive. The one with the close-cropped bleached hair and the nose stud has a sheen of sweat covering her face as she murmurs blood pressure stats to herself. Hannibal wouldn't sweat. He probably wouldn't rush either. His movements would be measured, graceful from the muscle memory of practice and the overall apathy of the outcome.

But Will doesn't want to be with Hannibal either. The things that he says and does while he's around that man don't feel quite right, like himself, as if he were under a cloud of hypnosis. A puppet with his strings being manipulated. *Take me with you.* The further he removes himself from Hannibal's influence the more clarity he gains. And embarrassment. The sounds Hannibal is able to charm from his body. An instrument with its maestro perfectly tuning those secret and sensitive spots. *I want you to fuck me, Will.* Will licks his lips.

"How much longer?" Will turns to yell at the driver while subtly letting go of the kid's hand. And it sounds good, almost like he gives a shit about this teen bleeding out. Not at all like he's counting down to when he can go home and think about what he's done in private. What this makes him. How much of the blame he can shift to Zeller for giving him a gun so easily. Will chews back the smirk curling the corners of his lips as he thinks about the deafening conversation Zeller is in for later with Crawford.

There's a twitch of a grimace on the man's face before he answers. "Fifteen minutes. I can make it in seven if these motherfuckers get out of the way." His palm strikes the horn.

"Not from here, are you?" The man's slight accent is intriguing to Will, more so than the triage happening next to him. God, the kid looks miserable as she struggles to breathe. She's bleeding so much the whites of her eyes are tinted red. Wouldn't it just be easier if it all stopped? If he could crush her until she's gone, until she doesn't exist anymore?

The man sighs in that tired kind of way of being asked, no, where are you really from, since moving to cold Minnesota and having the audacity of being bronzed year-round.

"Texas." His jaw clenches as he grinds down the insults filling his mouth.

"Huh, I would've guessed northern Mexico. Big family, lots of sisters?"

He almost turns around to glare at Will but decides against it as he weaves around a stubborn truck to make a quick right turn. "The fuc, yeah man?"

"Your s's are very pronounced."

"Okay? What are you, some kind of accent specialist? I didn't know they hired for that sort of thing."

Will inhales, settling into his uncomfortable position. "I'm more of a people specialist."

This elicits a snort from the blonde EMT. "Hey, just like Randy over here."

Will lets his gaze fall upon Randy. Randy with the chapped lips, little bits of skin bitten off near the seam of his bottom lip, cracks in the corners of his mouth and an angry red bump just beginning to fester on the high peak of his top lip. The yellowish ghost of jaundice haunts the skin around his dry mouth and blood shot eyes. He smirks roguishly at Will.

"Randy is an alcoholic who indulges in unsafe sex. I'm just an alcoholic," Will says matter-of-factly.

Randy frowns. "How the fuck? Why would you say that?"

The blonde EMT chortles. “Well, he’s certainly got you pegged, huh? Do me next,” she says excitedly.

“Shut up back there, I need to concentrate.” The driver sternly warns.

“Yes, you do. You’ve got lives to save and people to make proud. She’ll be proud, even when you can’t save all of them. She’s proud.”

The man blinks rapidly at the wash of tears coating his eyes before pressing the meaty heel of his hand to his eye. Will feels the baffled looks from the other two EMTs. But he isn’t psychic. The evidence is scattered throughout the ambulance from the family picture on the driver’s side visor to the single picture in a pendant of a teen with a rosary looped around the rear-view mirror. All it takes is for you to see.

“Oh my god,” Bev whispers. She keeps missing her back pocket to slip her phone into because her focus is solely on the eerie scene before her.

Even from the twelve feet back that one of the officers insisted that she stand while they used their brute force to bash the door open, she can smell the decay emanating from the small shack of a cabin. People often remark how cloyingly sweet death smells, in a sickening way it’s almost appetizing. Not to Bev. Death smells bitter to her. It smells like the rancid, urine-soaked hospice center her dying great grandfather was unfortunate enough to be a resident of. It smells like the sour dirt her parents coaxed her toss over her stiff hamster and the wilted yellow dandelion next to him in the shallow divot she dug for him. It smells like finality.

The open cabin door reveals a dark void, an endless room with eyes reflecting back to her hopelessly. Bev hesitates before stepping closer, her mind doing cartwheels in the dark, posing in various figures and shapes of dread. Closer. She sees a swish of long hair and her stomach flips.

It's one of the missing girls. She’s on the table. He gutted her. The bastard tore into her.

Closer. And she realizes her mistake. It's only a buck. Well, some parts of it are. It looks like Hobbs was trying to make a, a something. A creature? Why? The massive body is buck shaped while the head was replaced with a grey wolf, its lips drawn back into a toothy grimace. Hobbs somehow managed to attach the antlers to the wolf's skull. She feels the bile rise in her throat when the thought clicks into place.

He scalped her. The son of a bitch took her hair and sewed it onto this monstrosity.

Her hesitation earns her a hard shove as one of the local pd shoulders past her to gain access to the cabin's main and seemingly only room.

"Open your fucking eyes, girlie. There is no god here," he sneers.

Beverly would usually ignore the vaguely racist and sexist remark, there isn't enough time in her day to fixate on all the microaggressions she deals with. But his behavior could snowball quickly, gathering the other officers to join in or be left out in the cold. Bev firmly grabs his shoulder before he can step foot on the worn, narrow porch. He doesn't turn to face her. She sidles up alongside him to speak conspiratorially into his ear, hand still on his shoulder. To the other two officers already inside working the scene it looks like he's getting privileged information.

"It's Special Agent Katz. Not girlie, not sweetie, or any other derivative your limited vocabulary has at the ready whenever you meet someone of the opposite sex." Her gaze is fixed on the rotted window planters with the hand painted ivy furling along the edges.

He turns slowly to eye her. She doesn't shy away from meeting his glare.

"Got it?" She adds. She would normally smile now, a spoonful of sugar and all that, but instead she holds his stare with bored unblinking eyes.

"Yeah," he finally relents and drops his attention to the dead leaves on the dirty ground.

“Great,” Special Agent Katz pats his shoulder. She considered pressing him further, making him actually say it but that feels too much like something Crawford would do and she doesn’t want to be the *get your shit together because daddy’s home* type. At least not until she hits her sixties.

Katz walks ahead to enter the cabin before he does. That bitter smell of decay overwhelms her in a thick cloud of rot veined with the must of dried blood, causing her to hesitate before moving deeper into the small, cavernous cabin. The lifeless eyes that beckoned to her belong to five taxidermy critters; a fox, a squirrel, a goose and two small colorful birds, arranged on several shelves on the back wall near the back door. She feels the judgment at her back from the severed heads of several deer watching her from the far wall to her right near the wood-stove. There’s a sofa sleeper in front of the wood-stove with the mattress still pulled out, two pillows and a disheveled quilt waiting to be slipped back under. A small table with a lamp is situated on the right side of the sofa. The body of the lamp is that of a taxidermy grouse. She frowns at the thought of Hobbs sharing such close quarters with his developing teenaged daughter.

“Are you alright, Special Agent Katz? You look a little yellow?” The officer says louder than necessary as he shoulders past her to gain the lead. Someone snickers.

Beverly hones in on his officer badge as he passes her. *Brenner.*

“Officer Brenner,” Katz says.

His shoulders tense nonetheless his voice is without snark. “Yeah, SA Katz, what can I do for you?” He swivels his head slightly but does not turn to face her.

“Since I’m not familiar with the area you’re going to be my little assistant. Can you handle that?” She finally takes the lead from him to better assess how to process the cabin.

She wishes the rest of her team were here, Price is a fucking star when it comes to processing latent prints which this place must be full of and Zeller can walk through a crime scene while plotting out a likely scenario for the timeline of events leading up to the murder. She doesn’t

even have her kit with her for fiber analysis and this local department is woefully lacking with crime scene analysis tech.

"We're gonna need someone from MU, preferably a department head as lead from chem to get down here with kits. It's going to be a long night, gentlemen."

Someone groans while another officer swears under his breath. Officer Brenner dutifully makes the call. SA Katz lets her eyes float back to the *thing* on what must be the kitchen table. She moves closer, walking a wide circle around it while the other officers seem to be preoccupied with assessing any other aspect of the cabin. Patches of fur were shaved away in various spots with something carved into the flesh. Flies nestle into the skin, preventing her from getting a clear view of what those carvings might be. Her steps halt as she approaches the rear of the animal. A snake hangs down where the fluffy white tail should have been. The sharp points of its fangs look wet in the light. Alive. Mouth caught open in mid-strike. Bev swallows thickly while turning away from the beast to superficially look at the canned goods stacked on a wire rack against the wall. But she can feel it behind her, inching closer in the gloom of the primitive cabin. Her eyes scan the shelves, making their way down to the bottom rack where a black pelt lays, probably from a bear. Atop it are various bones, a few shed antlers, several wings from a duck or maybe a grouse? She quietly clears her throat.

"And someone get some damn spotlights in here!" She yells to no one in particular as she leaves the cabin for some air.

Bev sighs heavily with her head back and eyes closed against the cool breeze. It's only a moment of calm but it feels heavenly.

"Okay," she sternly says to herself as she shifts back to the task at hand which would be checking out the other two dwellings on the property that she caught sight of when they first arrived.

Bev grabs for her slim flashlight from her belt holster along with her gun, holding them both with a sword grip as she edges along the property to circle behind the cabin. There's a padlocked shed off to the right with no windows which will need to be processed next. Meaning that they'll need more bodies from MU. And judging by the moon cutout, an outhouse further back and to the left. The perfect little project for her new friend Officer Brenner to evidence index.

Bev moves noiselessly on the dirt path towards the shed, ears perked for any sounds of distress. But all is quiet, even when she leans her ear close to the dry rotted door. Bev struggles to swallow, trying to stop the retch in her stomach from the smell hiding behind those doors. It's worse than the cabin. Denser. She shines her flashlight down on the padlock hanging open carelessly. Special Agent Katz uses the edge of her flashlight to pull the door outwards from the handlebar. She steps out of the swing of the door with her light trained on the dark, flicking from wall to wall, just glancing off the table in the middle and what is sitting on it. Every square inch of each of the four walls are covered in various antlers in different shapes and sizes and bone white skulls. So many skulls of seemingly whatever animal Hobbs could get his grubby hands on. There're even bones attached to the ceiling, raining down in drips like an apocalyptic storm. She manages to make it to the tall, weedy grass before she hurls. It isn't much considering she only had that muffin and stale burnt coffee with Zeller in the conference room this morning. God that feels like months ago. She crouches with her elbows on her knees, hands in her hair as she steadies her shaking breath. They're going to need. What exactly? What biology professor can help her with what's in that shed? She needs to call Crawford because that altar in the shed is the most other worldly *thing* she's ever laid eyes on. She recognized two out of the three faces that she saw before her mind clicked off; Delilah Woodward, Alice Anderson and Rachel Winn. This location has officially been bumped up from possible missing persons hideaway to homicide scene.

Bev stands up, shaking the pins and needles out from her tense calves. She cautiously approaches the doorway again with her phone at the ready. She's going to need to send positive proof to the group chat for the additional resources she'll be requesting in the next hour or so from oversight lead, Kade Prurnell. Bev considers blocking the message from Jack to keep him from jetting over here fueled by rage alone by the subtle smoke signal for guidance. He said her training wheels were off and he wouldn't be there if she fell and scraped her knee. But this is more than a little boo-boo. This is a sinkhole opening up in the cul-de-sac with an eldritch horror waiting at the bottom, mouth open to catch her as she plummets all the way down. Just one pic should be enough. A wide shot to include the wall art. She doesn't have to get close to it. The it looking alive enough to fly off the table, screeching from all its mouths, directly at her face. Bev swallows and holds her breath to steady her hand, focusing on the far wall as she taps her screen. She doesn't want to look at the thing longer than she has to. Once she gets the pic and quickly checks it before sending it off to the group chat assigned to this case, she kicks the door shut before turning her back to the shed. Unexpectedly, the outside air no longer feels as refreshing as it did when she came out here looking for solace and a reprieve from the dank cabin. There's an itch between her shoulder blades, increasing in its burn to be scratched the longer she stands in front of the shed. So, she walks ahead, spying a worn path in the bent tall grass. As she gains distance from the shed walking towards some sort of body of water judging by the rushing sound and the now gritty, barren landscape underfoot, her phone rings. Her boot kicks a slender stick, bark stripped so that it resembles a bone, maybe a tibia. Bev's brow furrows as she answers Jack's call.

“Go for Katz,” she says.

“You’re really testing the waters here, Katz,” Jack says.

“Well, how’s the water looking? Safe for a swim?” She checks around her for any of the officers nosing around.

Jack only sighs into the phone.

“We weren't ready for something like this.” Bev replies while toeing the stick when she finds another smaller shard. Her head jerks up as she scans the dusty, dry soil with patches of char dappled about.

“Don't let them see that.”

“Right. Any suggestions on how to do that?” Bev says as she rushes back to the cabin. She can hear Jack walking outside. There's birds singing.

“Get Graham back in the game. Bloom's his attending now so that should anchor him. Are you running? Why are you running?” A chill runs down Jack's spine.

“There's burn pits. He's been burning bodies here.”

“SA Katz!” Officer Brenner yells.

“What now?” She calls back.

“There's meat in a cooler. It looks,” he pauses, his face has a tint of green to it, “human.”

“Motherfucker!” Jack yells.

Jack’s lower back aches from pacing so he goes to sit on the bench near a trash can with a rather large, unfazed squirrel slouched in front of with his bounty collected from said trash. He checks his phone again. Nothing from Bella. He rereads Miriam’s messages for context clues in case he missed something.

The deer are running again

Are you?

Because I am

He looks around. This is their spot where they would meet to discuss the work that Miriam was doing that couldn’t be overheard on campus. But that wasn’t all. Was it? Miriam idolized Jack and he took advantage of that. A plump old man with a marriage slowly drying up suddenly feels sleek and fit when seeing himself through the eyes of a young woman. Their talks became more personal. Private. He knew she was going to kiss him before she did it. But he didn’t stop her from doing it. To his credit though, he did tell her that it could never happen again. And then she was gone like a spooked deer into the brush. Jack gets up from the bench. He’ll walk the trail that leads to the stream once more before heading to the office. He’s got a pile of shit to move and a small shovel. Always a day late and a dollar short with this fucking job. But he’ll be back here this evening when the deer run these paths. Maybe Miriam will be running with them.

Jack barely registers the woman on the park bench, seemingly taking pictures of herself, unashamed of her narcissism even as he looks down at her while he passes. He does wonder to himself though, why so close to his bench when there are so many other empty ones further down? Maybe the light is better near him. What do kids these days call this time of day? Golden hour.

Freddie slips her phone into the pocket of her teal peacoat. She gets up from the bench to better track where Crawford is walking to with the guise of throwing some unseen object in her palm into the trash can. Instead of heading to his bulky SUV, Crawford veers to the left in a brisk hustle, probably to walk that deer trail once more. She'll accidentally bump into on his way back to drop the button sized voice recorder into his coat pocket. They're a bit pricey and the battery life is shit but it's got an app that syncs to her phone automatically so there's no need to try to get the damned thing back to upload to her computer. It's tabloid journalist behavior that she's resorting to but her hold over Brian seems to be weakening. Hence the bug on Jack. Always have a fail-safe. And Freddie's got two. The other being the hidden screen sharing program on Brian's work phone constantly streaming to her laptop since she's doubtful he'll share crime scene photos this time around. She's got a hunch that these are going to be delightfully grisly. Real screamers that her readers will gobble up like the little gore goblins that they are.

Freddie cranes her neck as Jack disappears from view when she feels something scuttle over her vintage Gucci leather boots. Her nose scrunches in disgust as she frowns down at the fat squirrel sniffing her boots, his dirty little hands smudging the oil sheen she just massaged into the leather to keep it supple. Freddie flings the rodent from her boot and goes to kick it further away from her, but the plump bastard is faster than she assumed and manages to evade her attack. She watches the lush tail flick at her in agitation and she looks down at her supposedly mink fur cuffs which are suspiciously similar to the garbage munching rodent's tail.

That's what I get for buying from an online auction site item unseen.

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth as she remembers the scandalized gasp from Brian as she petted the fur cuffs in admiration with the coat still in the box. He chastised her. Saying some nonsense like, but you're a vegetarian! Freddie pantomimed a sad face while saying a well-practiced response of how there's no harm in buying vintage clothes and honoring the sacrifice those animals made because it would be plain wasteful otherwise. When in actuality she doesn't give a flying fuck about animal suffering. She just doesn't eat meat because the idea of consuming the flesh of a dead body repels her. Especially after her expose piece about the cattle farm. The whole operation was deeply so unsanitary. But if Freddie were to be honest with herself for just a moment, the real reason is most likely from finding her father's bloated corpse in his favorite recliner parked in front of a glaring tv, needle still sticking out of his arm and an empty whisky bottle at his feet. The overflowing ashtray did little to mask the smell of decay in his dark apartment. A haven for slobs is what he used to call it. The ghastly hues of green on his pale skin reminded her of the sheen on roast beef under fluorescent lights. Two courses were set in motion that day for Miss Freddie Lounds; her aversion to meat and her vendetta against Will Graham, the man responsible for the death of both of her parents.

“Motherfucker!” Jack yells as he hustles back to his car.

He’s doing too many things at once to pay attention to where he’s rushing, body slamming the slim woman he saw earlier on the bench. Her hand grasps his arm to keep upright, losing purchase, slipping down his sleeve, as she falls into a heap on the ground. Her eyes wide in disbelief at her sudden change in position.

“Ma’am, here, let me help you.” Jack offers the hand that isn’t still clutching his work phone down to her but not an apology. The most useful tactic he was taught in academy was to never admit your wrongdoing, even if you’re holding a bloody knife with someone stabbed at your feet. Never make blame easier for someone to throw on you.

“Oh, thank you, sir. I didn’t see you coming or I would’ve moved out of the way.” Her grip is strong for someone so petite.

Jack merely nods his head at her remark.

“Is everything alright? You look so pale and sweaty.”

Jack tsks. “Work.” He shrugs his shoulders and goes to walk past her to his car.

“My gosh, you certainly must have an important job to be charging around like that, not a care in the world for anyone who’s in your path.”

Jack narrows his eyes at her tone, the same one he’s heard numerous times over the radio whenever white ladies want the police to crack down on black kids having a good time in public spaces.

“I do, ma’am, and,” his phone rings as if right on cue. “Duty calls.”

She smiles at him in that thin, tight-lipped way that's more akin to a grimace, watching him get into his car and reverse out of the parking spot.

Jack scrolls through his phone while driving under the speed limit for Dr. Bloom's number since she's going to have to move mountains of paperwork before tomorrow morning to get Graham cleared for profiling that horror show at the Hobbs' cabin. When a call from Zeller interrupts him.

"You're not gonna tell me how to do my job, right, Zeller?" Even for Jack the tone is more irritated than usual.

"No, not at all. It's just that," Brian pauses to swallow, a dry click echoes in the car. "Graham killed Hobbs. Shot him eight times."

Jack closes his eyes as he stops at the traffic light and bites his lip until saliva floods his mouth to soothe the pain.

"I just thought you should know. That's all."

Jack opens his eyes and nods to himself.

"Anything else that I should know?" Jack turns left to head back to the office where he'll busy himself until dusk. Then he'll be back here looking for Miriam.

"Do you think Dr. Bloom can handle something like this? Not to be sexist or anything but she lacks field training. I mean she's a professor for fuck's sake."

"Are you suggesting I invite Dr. Lecter back?"

Brian sighs. “That’s not my call, sir. I’m only,” Brian trails off. “Did you see it?”

“Yeah, I saw it,” Jack says.

“You know the thing that’s bothering me the most about it? This pervert had to put tits on it, teenage tits. And three of them. Like, what the fuck is that about?”

“I would say you could ask him, but Graham fucked that up for us, didn’t he?”

“He most certainly did.”

“And just how did that happen? Because I don’t remember issuing him a weapon.”

“There was a hostage situation, things escalated quickly.”

“That’s a good spin for you shit the bed. Get your details sorted for the lengthy report Prurnell is going to want on her desk immediately.”

“I’ll get on that. When should we be expecting you?”

“I’ll be there when I get there.” Crawford disconnects from Zeller, gives himself one deep inhale and exhale before calling Dr. Bloom.

Freddie plucks the ear bud out from her ear as she sits on the park bench relishing in that calm feeling that always seems to wash over her whenever she gets a huge break in a story like this. It feels like enlightenment, how everything comes together, and she can see all the

connections and inner workings of the story. Although she imagines that Buddhists would be appalled by her sordid back-alley shortcut to attain spiritual liberation.

She gets up from the bench and walks to her car. She'll hurry home and get to work drafting the article complete with, hopefully, plenty of pictures. But first, Pad Thai, one woefully sugary Thai iced coffee and a bottle of gin. Freddie is going to need a variety of energy sources to keep her revved up until morning.

Fatigue has her heavy hand across Hannibal's eyes as he drives from his office to the workhouse where Miriam Lass lays at the bottom of a dried out well. He speeds recklessly around cars he deems too slow as they stick to the posted limit, weaving from one lane to the next to jockey for a better position. A particularly devious lane change earns him a drawn-out horn honk from the cut off driver behind him. But due to the blaring crescendo of Bach's Magnificat Hannibal barely pays any attention to it. His mind wanders from the manageable list of things he must accomplish tonight before driving to Will's house to tend to his hounds to Will. His thoughts always find their way back to Will Graham. It seems every time they are away from each other Hannibal has to practically start from scratch to coax Will back to being comfortable with him again. He truly is like the stray dogs he likes to collect. They've talked. Hannibal has never shared so many personal details of his life before. They've been intimate. Gloriously so. And yet. He can feel Will curling in on himself, retracting inwards for protection. He doesn't seem to believe how alike they are even after coming to the realization of who Hannibal is and what he has done and will continue to do. The only tact left is to show him.

The reek of human waste still manages to shove its way into Hannibal's nose even with the balaclava on as he enters the room where Miriam is being kept. The brisk bite of the cold isn't enough to sterilize the smells oozing from the poorly insulated walls. But it isn't death hanging in the air. Someone spitefully made a mess of themselves to make a point.

"What exactly is the message you're trying to send me with all of this?" Hannibal asks in his best rendition of Jack Crawford's voice as he yells down at the prone body of Miriam Lass covered in her own filth.

Even without noticing the minute movement of her ribs expanding with each controlled breath Hannibal knows that she's alive from her heart beating fiercely in her chest, not as

easily controlled as her breathing. He can feel it in the heat of his itching leather gloved palms. She's a lion laying in wait in its cage with an invisible thorn in its paw.

"I see you've broken the bucket I left you. The metal handle is missing." Hannibal turns his head to inhale the ungodly cologne Jack prefers to wear.

Still no movement, no response, not even a twitch of her little toe turned bluish from the cold.

"I'm going to lower the harness now, put it on. Then we'll get you cleaned up and a hot meal inside you. How does that sound?" Hannibal goes through the motions of setting up the harness on the makeshift pulley rig before he lowers the belt onto Miriam's back.

He stares at her motionless body for several moments before he feels his anger rising, like steam in a kettle.

"Miriam!" He cries out, losing his composure a little as her name leaves his mouth accented in his natural speech.

This is what gets her moving. Slowly picking herself up and fastening the harness around her thin body all the while staring up at the space he occupies with narrowed eyes searching the dim for his black clothed body. The process is faster than the last time he was here, proof that she's adjusting to having one hand. She tugs once, their signal that she's securely in and Hannibal starts to pull her up from the depths of the damp well.

Usually, Hannibal assists Miriam with pulling herself over the ledge of the well, since watching her struggle with one arm pushed his patience to its limit the first time he came back to check her vitals and let her walk around for circulation purposes. Not today. He doesn't want to touch her until she gets hosed down. Miriam grunts as she grapples with tossing her body over the edge onto the ground in front of Hannibal's mat black boots. The triumph in her eyes is like a flame in the dark, searing into his skin. Hannibal tilts his head in response to the fiendish smile overtaking Miriam's face. He frowns diminutively when he notices dirt between her white teeth.

Miriam springs up with surprising speed and balance, rushing towards Hannibal. She strikes out at him lightning fast for someone malnourished and borderline hyperthermic, snatching the balaclava from Hannibal's head.

"I know you. I know who you are." Miriam seethes at Hannibal.

Judging by how her amputated limb moves Hannibal surmises that she's jabbing a pointed finger at him.

"Of course, you do. I'm your mentor and this is a safe house. My name is,"

"Don't. Don't you dare. You're not him. You're not Jack." She starts to back away, dropping the mask to the ground as she fumbles under her nightgown for her hidden weapon. The metal glints, stealing its shine from the yellowed, bare overhead bulb even covered in filth it still manages to shine.

And suddenly Hannibal feels very bored with all of this. His year long plan now feels predictable, trite. How unoriginal this scenario is, an appalling lack of imagination. He pivots to the left just as Miriam moves to jam the metal tip of the bucket handle into his side. As he's in motion, Hannibal uses his palm to smash Miriam's nose upwards, splintering her cartilage into her brain, piercing the delicate spongy organ. Miriam takes a dazed step back, her hand unsuccessfully trying to collect the blood gushing from her nose while still gripping the thin metal rod. Her amputated limb waves uncoordinatedly in the space near her face. There's a whimper coming from her parted mouth but all she can hear is the rushing of thunder in her ears.

Hannibal watches as Miriam's eyes roll back, still stumbling backwards.

"No, wait!" Hannibal yells as he reaches for her instead of the rope coiled at his boots.

Miriam must feel him in the air because she turns abruptly and hurls herself twelve feet down the well. The steel ring at the end of the rope clangs against the rusted hoist as it spends its purchase.

“Fuck.” Hannibal sighs.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Hannibal changes his plans regarding Miriam's release. Jack takes a call from his boss, Kade Prurnell. Freddie collides with both Jack and Hannibal. While Will makes his way back home. With a special cameo from Clarice Starling.

Chapter Notes

Content/trigger warnings: description of a corpse, general unease

aab= all available bodies
NAT= new agent trainee
oob= opening of business
caution red wine is not good for allergies

thank you for sticking around during my 6 month case of writer's block. it's usually not this bad and i'm not sure if it's because i soured on finishing this story after reading the accusations about brian fulller. but we've made it this far together and it would be a waste to not finish together.

Chapter 24

Hannibal peers down into the well at Miriam's still jerking corpse, one leg and one arm, her intact one, ragdolled into precise right angles. He sighs again, unable to control the exhaustion that washes over him. He could just burn it all down and walk away. Go someplace warm like Cuba. Hannibal has enough liquid assets and a selection of passports on hand to be gone in the night and sunning himself on a beach in the morning. And nothing compares to swimming against an ocean current, not even the olympic sized pool at the exclusive gym he pays an exorbitant yearly membership fee for.

As Hannibal outlines the logistics of such a sudden plan his thoughts drift to the image of Will Graham next to him on the beach, laying on a towel wearing hunter green swim trunks. Showing plenty of pale thigh. Just waiting to be kissed by the sun. The serene quiet of

waves cresting on the shore undisturbed by the nagging barks for attention from absent dogs. Therein lies the problem. Too many dogs, too many responsibilities. The leash that ties Will to this forsaken place and job. And what's to be done about that?

And suddenly, Hannibal feels his adrenaline rush in what he thinks is akin to joy. He'll still plant the arm as planned in the park later this evening for Jack to find. Instead of Miriam calling from this location Hannibal will just have to do that himself with her currently turned off phone and toss it into the well before leaving quickly enough to not be implicated. Hannibal refuses to think about the years he wasted on psychic driving to deceive Miriam that it was Jack who abducted her and kept her hostage. That it was Jack who took her arm in some twisted ego game to be memorialized as the one who finally found her. Her testimony was going to be so raw and emotional. Beautiful. The horrendous cologne, the voice recordings, the mannerisms. All for nothing. At least he had the foresight to record Miriam reading several scripts which he can splice together for his purposes tonight. Even if it ends up sounding subpar due to her appalling voice acting. Being cold and hungry in the well with an amputated arm was exactly what she needed for her to be convincing with her emotional tone. The desperation. The longing.

His nostrils flare in anger as he forces himself to take a deep breath and hold it for several seconds before exhaling. His second exhale stutters at the thought that right now all he truly wants is to see Will, or even just to hear Will's voice. It will have to wait. As a contingency Hannibal never brings his cell phone with him to either his house on the bluff or here. Less circumstantial evidence to be used in court against him. As he's learned over the years working with various incompetent police agencies, unless you confess to a crime there really is no way to prove that it was committed by you. Lie detectors are admissible in court but are used as a sort of pony show to convince the jury of something. Evidence collected, be it hair or fiber, even fingerprints all have an inherent margin of error to them that may place you at a scene but doesn't dictate your actions there. Even the holy grail of dna doesn't spell your name out quite like television would have you believe. What's really on trial is your character, your personality, your attractiveness. Wealth, whiteness, gender are all additional privileges in your favor. How easy would it be for the FBI to shift all of the Ripper's killings onto soon to be retired Jack Crawford? With his stunning and storied career at the FBI spanning several decades and just as many burned bridges, there will be plenty of co-workers to raise some doubt and suspicion about his solve rate. And certainly, being a black man who killed a young white woman, allegedly, would not help his odds of false imprisonment.

With a renewed pep in his step, Hannibal waltzes around the dingy work area, planting little pieces of Jack Crawford here and there that he's collected these last several weeks. Some clothes stolen from his closet at the office, fallen pieces of hair carefully teased out of the carpet fibers under his desk, a finished can of soda with his saliva no doubt swimming at the bottom.

He still has a long night of driving ahead of him; retrieving the arm from his home and then placing it at the creek situated at the end of the deer trail at the park near Quantico, then back to the well to make the call before finally driving to Will's home. The dogs feel like a lighter

burden now that they can be used as an alibi. Hopefully, with time on his side, Hannibal can manage a quick phone call to Will.

Jack tucks his chin to his chest. With his trench coat collar up and fedora hat tipped down he looks like an unassuming old man that fell asleep on a park bench while watching the pretty sunset. His work phone vibrates in his pocket. He ignores the first and second call but decides to check who is making all the fuss on the third call. His jaw clicks as he reads Prurnell on the screen. Crawford answers with a smile in his voice.

"Ms. Prurnell, how can I help you this fine evening?"

"Where was the enthusiasm the other times I called?" There is no mirth in her voice. Only iron.

"I apologize about that I was on another call."

"Really? I hope it was with Brian Zeller regarding his termination."

Jack hears her chair creak as she leans back into it. He swallows the acid taste in his mouth.

"Surely a little hanky-panky in a conference room isn't grounds for termination?" Jack tries to keep his tone light, adding a tiny chuckle to hide the fact he has no idea what Prurnell is talking about. And being out of the loop is never a good thing in this line of work.

"Hanky-panky? Is that what you call leaking confidential information to the press? Press, ha, what am I saying? It's a fucking rag, is what it is, that Tattlecrime blog."

Jack moves the phone from his ear to look at his screen as he accesses his email for his Tattlecrime alerts when he realizes the folder hasn't synced for at least seven hours.

"Jack? Are you still there? Jack!" Prurnell yells at the sky as Jack stands, head tilted back with his phone in the air to get better service.

A flurry of notifications ping his phone. Jack only needs to look at one to know that Bev was right. Brian did sell out to Lounds.

"I'm here."

"Are you? Tell me, where is here, exactly? Because I've been informed that you are not at any of the crime scenes in Minnesota."

"I'm here," he stutters out. "I mean, I'm at Quantico."

"Jack, that is unacceptable. You need to get on a plane to handle your team. Which is dwindling by the minute. What is this I hear about SA Graham shooting a suspect?"

Jack can picture Prurnell in her sleek marble office with her heels off, relishing giving him a what-for in her cushy leather chair. She's never liked how he could shift gears from commanding to comradery so easily with whomever he worked with. But she'd be pleased as a peach to know that over the years those transitions became more jolted, and stalled, as he lost his touch.

"There was a hostage situation. It escalated." There's a sigh trapped in his lungs, just yawning to get out.

"Well, I can't wait to read your thorough report about it." Her end of the line is so quiet that there's a faint buzz of static as the phone tries to focus on anything else rather than this conversation.

"Zeller will be handling the report." Jack sits back down and picks his hat up from the ground.

"Zeller is suspended until further notice. But let it be known that I will make it my mission so that he never gets any higher up than a nightshift security job at whatever ghost mall is still open. I want you to write the report and I want it oob tomorrow. As for Graham, I'm placing him on leave pending evaluation by Dr. Bloom. Send both Zeller and Graham back asap."

"Right, right, just I wasn't there for the, uh, hostage situation, so I can't submit that," Jack says.

He's thankful that he called Dr. Bloom earlier to have her pencil Will in for an official blocked window appointment tomorrow morning. And the ever-eager Janice was more than happy to book Will a flight back today. After he's done taking his lashings from Prurnell,

he'll follow up with Janice about Will's ticket and getting one for Brian too. Jack will remember her diligent efforts come Christmas time. And he'll have to call in a favor from Dr. Bloom to have her meet with Will late tonight. He needs to be the first to know what's going on with Will, unofficially, before things get complicated.

"You weren't there?" She repeats back to Crawford, in that musing tone she uses when she's thinking something through.

Jack swallows roughly. Given all that's happening it isn't difficult to summon the tears patiently waiting for their moment to release. It's almost a relief that it finally happens. Almost.

"Kade. All these years that I've worked." He stumbles over how to word this without pissing her off because he's been there longer than her.

He was even offered that position but refused due to his internal conflict over the bullshit political games played at that level. Games which, if the rumors are true, and if her sleek office is any indicator, Prurnell is quite good at and has something in the works with the mayor over in Minnesota. But the territorial spats reminded Jack of kids cavorting around tree houses with paintball guns and packs of gum for bribery. Except there are real life consequences to redirecting funding in poverty-stricken communities from social services to new military-like gear to a police department that has been told since day one of training that every civilian is a threat to their safety. Your first extreme force investigation is a rite of passage with someone buying you a round or two at some shit hole cop bar.

Jack thought he could be a positive influence whilst down in the dirt with the rest of his team. And just look at all the good that did him; an agent in training presumed dead due to his insistence that she take the lead on following up on a tip, another agent leaking info to the press that Jack has been setting up to take over his role once he retired. And then there's Will Graham. He may have broken Will Graham.

"Bella has cancer." It strangely feels good to finally tell someone.

There's a clatter on Kade's end, probably dropped her Montblanc pen that she's always twirling between her fingers.

"Jack, I'm so sorry." The sorrow in Prurnell's voice cracks her iron tone from earlier. "Is it?" She trails off, unsure how to ask specifics without crossing co-worker boundaries.

"Terminal. Lung cancer. She doesn't even smoke." He forces himself to laugh harshly to

push aside the sob screaming to be let loose.

“I’ve read somewhere that more and more people are being diagnosed with,” she pauses, “that who don’t smoke. Something to do with higher levels of air pollution and particulate matter.”

“Yeah,” Jack says.

“Okay, well then. The plan still stands; Brian and Will are to be sent back. Brian is suspended which will give him ample time to write that report. I understand how much of an asset Will is to your team, so contact Dr. Bloom for an eval as soon as possible which I want you to be around for.”

The hint is clear. Jack doesn’t have to go to Minnesota. He can stay here and find Miriam. He at least fix one of his fuck ups.

“Understood.” Jack’s phone notifies him that someone else is trying to call him. He doesn’t need to look at the screen to know that it’s Miriam.

Jack gets up and briskly walks to the deer path on cold numbed feet.

“Is there anything else?” He asks cautiously.

“No. Not at this time. Go spend time with your wife.” Kade disconnects before Jack has time to respond.

Jack pauses his stride to stare at his dead phone screen, willing Miriam to call him again. The phone comes alive with her name on the screen. He holds his breath as he accepts the call, bringing the phone to his ear.

“I’m scared, Jack. It’s cold here. You need to find me.” Miriam’s voice is tinny and far away sounding.

“Where?” He whispers as he breaks out into a trot on the path.

“The creek.” There’s a final click noise and Jack’s certain she’s disconnected until she speaks again.

“I trusted you.” Thrust like a knife between his ribs, the sentence leaves Jack gasping as he quickens to a run.

He stops as he reaches the creek, scanning the edges in the twilight when there’s a rustle from behind him. Someone sneaking around. Jack unholsters his gun and flashlight in a snap, trained on the still moving bush.

“Come on out from there with your hands up.”

There’s a shuffle of feet but no one steps forward.

“Now!” He thunders into the dark night sky.

A slim figure ducks out from the tall bush, gloved hands raised, same teal peacoat from their earlier run-in. But with her brilliant red hair tucked under a simple black knit hat Jack sees the resemblance now, that little Irish bulbous nose, the wide discerning eyes that seem to notice every minute detail and the slash of a mouth capable of ruining decades-built reputations with a simple sneer of a remark.

“Son of a bitch.”

She can’t help but smirk. “That would’ve been the title of my memoir if I was born with the corresponding parts. But.” She shrugs her shoulders.

“You’re Freddy Lounds’ daughter.” Jack doesn’t lower his gun, but he does keep his finger off the trigger.

“That’s some great detective work.” She lowers her hands to rest at her sides.

“Why are you here?”

“Same reason as you. Miriam Lass.”

“That sounds like a confession, Ms. Lounds.”

“And that sounds like the lazy police work I’ve been accustomed to dealing with.” She steps around the bush.

Crawford shakes his head. “Stop moving.”

“Sure,” she says, not at all phased by the gun still aimed at her chest.

“Let me guess, you were the honey pot to entice Brian to leak those details to your dad’s blog?”

“Well, now I’m offended. If you would pay your employees a living wage, then it wouldn’t be so easy to bribe them. Honestly, some mandatory therapy would go a long way too. So many of them are just aching to share the horrible things they’ve seen.” Her eyes narrow in the beam of light.

“Right. Well, either I escort you back to your car or I arrest you for obstructing a crime scene.” Jack holsters his gun with one hand while the other keeps her in glare of the flashlight. His shoulders slump when he sees that smug quirk of her mouth.

“She’s here?”

“That doesn’t concern you.” Jack moves to her to take her by the elbow. “Now, where are you parked, Ms. Lounds?”

She furrows her brow. “Please call me Freddie, that’s with an ‘ie’, Ms. Lounds sounds so dowdy.”

Jack raises a brow.

“Remember what I said about being born with the wrong parts?”

The frankness of her remark stuns Jack.

“I’m sure he’s proud of you or whatever people like you feel.”

“Probably not,” Freddie says, stopping Jack for a moment as he starts to move them back up the path.

“I mean since he’s dead. So.”

Jack stares at the side of her dimly illuminated face from the flashlight pointed down at the ground.

“You? You’re the one running that blog now?”

She turns to look at him with her shark like smile, teeth gleaming.

“Oh, are you a TattleTail? I’m always open to constructive criticism, especially from a fan.” Freddie tilts her chin to bask in the waning light.

Jack shakes his head in disbelief because he’ll be damned if he tells this woman that yes, he has noticed a shift in the quality of the writing as well as the general organization to the layout, less drug fueled helter-skelter manic ramblings that sometimes lost the plot entirely. Instead, he drags her along the path back to the parking lot.

Freddie lets Jack walk her in the wrong direction for several moments before correcting him.

“Actually, I think I’m back that way.” Freddie jerks her head back the way they came from.

“Ms. Lounds, I don’t have time for this.” Jack tightens his grip to make his point known.

“No really, I’m parked that way. I got turned around in the dark. And you frightened me with your big, scary gun.” Freddie mocks a pathetic frown.

Jack sighs as he roughly pivots to back the way they came. He remembers that there is a small side parking lot at the end of the deer run but you have to walk through the woods to get to it. Walking through an unbeaten path is just Freddie’s style.

They walk silently together. Jack tries to subtly flash the light along the creek’s edge every now and again as if he were looking for animals. To his dismay, Freddie spots the arm before he does.

“Look, there’s Miriam. Well, a part of her at least.”

Jack glares at Freddie in shock as he reaches for his gun again. She puts her hands up as she backs up from him.

“Stand over there,” Jack flicks his head at a sapling.

Jack steps closer, scanning the distance for movement.

“I need you to make a phone call for me. Can you do that?”

He doesn’t see Freddie rolls her eyes, but he can feel it at his back.

“Yes.” She hisses with annoyance.

Jack tells her Jimmy Price’s number.

“And who is it that I’m calling?” Freddie tries to ask but someone is already speaking to her.

“Jimmy Price speaking,” he says.

“Yes, hi. I’m here at Veterans Park on 5th Ave with Jack Crawford. And I think we found a piece of Miriam Lass back on the deer trail. Jack said that I should call you.” Freddie moves the phone from her ear to quickly snap several pictures of the active crime scene. One of which is an especially stunning shot with Jack himself, looking rather detective-ly at the creek’s edge. The setting sun really adds to the mystery of it all.

She still hears Jimmy talking as she disconnects the call. Freddie takes a few timid steps closer to Jack when his cell phone vibrates loudly.

“Go for Crawford,” he gruffly says.

“Agent Crawford? This is NAT Starling. We got a couple hits from Miriam’s cell phone. At first, I thought it was a fluke? But twice can’t be a coincidence.”

There’s a sharp twist deep in Jack’s chest, like he pulled a muscle there with prickly pins and

needles raining down his right arm. His numbed fingers almost lose their grip on the phone so Jack cradles his phone against his ear with his shoulder. He takes a long blink to refocus the swarming scenery around him.

"Has a location been pinged yet?" He isn't sure how he managed to get that sentence out when it feels like there's no air for him to breathe.

"Yeah. I mean, yes. Sir. The call tree listed Beverly Katz and Brian Zeller, but I was unable to reach them. Jimmy Price was in the lab when I told him, but he said he was being called to another scene. What should I do?"

Jack wants to wipe at the sweat beading along his hairline but that would risk his balanced crouch. There was supposed to be a coming back to the start moment for when he finally found Miriam with the same team he worked with during her disappearance. It feels like a bad omen to bring new people on board.

"Put out an aab. I want half of those people here at the park with Jimmy Price taking lead and the other half at her phone location with me. Send me the address."

"Umm, right. Sending it now," Clarice says.

"Got it," Jack replies when his phone chirps. "I need you to follow up with my assistant about two plane tickets and a psych eval appointment."

"Yeah, I can do that." Clarice responds eagerly.

"Good," Jack says before disconnecting the call.

He maps the familiar sounding address to get his bearings. This is when Jack gives in to the sinking feeling, crumbling to his knees from his poised crouch. The damp earth wets the fabric of his trousers no doubt leaving an imprint of mud. He claws into the spongy ground to fight the wail building in his soul. How many times has he driven past that run-down shack? Twice a day, every day, for the last two years. How long ago was it when he stopped those delinquents from throwing stones at the windows that were boarded up shortly after? How did he not see her when he was in there as a courtesy call to check out the weed smell that a concerned neighbor phoned in?

Jack brings a hand to his mouth to bite down harshly on his knuckle. His mouth floods with

the taste of his blood and the brackish creek water mixing with his thick saliva. He lets the warm hand at his shoulder ease the pain swelling in his chest.

"Mr. Crawford, I'm going to call an ambulance for you." Freddie's voice is as comforting as her touch.

Jack shakes his head while trying to sit back on his haunches as the world vibrates around him.

"Easy now." She assists his movements. "I think you're having a heart attack." Freddie ignores the vibrating in her right coat pocket, willing to bet her left pinkie that it's bedbug Brian calling about his suspension. She can't deal with his whining right now. Not when she needs to keep Jack alive.

The hard plastic chair in the critical care unit is unforgiving no matter how many times Will changes his position. He's been left to wait in this ammonia smelling purgatory for hours now while they assign a case worker to newly orphaned Abigail Hobbs unless an extended family member steps up. Will stares at his phone, wondering if 5.99 is too high a price for a fishing game that he'll probably never play again when his work phone rings from his pocket loudly in the stark hallway. Will recognizes the name, Janice Clark, Jack's assistant.

"Hello?" Will says quietly when a nurse glares at him from her station.

"Am I speaking with Mister Will Graham?"

"Yeah." He keeps his personal phone balanced on the width of his thigh.

"Hello Mr. Graham! I'm Janice, Jack's right hand gal. Now, if you'll check your email, you should have a plane ticket to come on back this evening. Please arrange for a ride to the airport as I understand that Mr. Zeller has the appointed rental. I have your eta at, oh gosh, around nine thirty pm. Well, hopefully you can catch a nap on the plane, and I'll leave some coffee for you in the breakroom so that you're bright eyed and bushy tailed for your introductory session with Dr. Bloom. Now that's not to be confused with your mandatory appointment tomorrow at ten am sharp."

Will can practically hear the dry lipstick crawling into the creases of her thin lips as she forces her too big smile through the phone.

“Tonight?”

Janice tsks. “Yes, tonight. Per Mr. Crawford’s strong recommendation, you are to have a quick consultation when you arrive and then a more formal appointment tomorrow morning at ten am.” She taps her pen, no doubt along the notes that she took from her previous conversation with Jack.

“What about my luggage? I think I left it in the rental.”

“That’s already en route to Dulles and will be waiting for you once you land there at the security desk near the bag pick up.”

Will sighs tiredly.

“Is there anything else, Mr. Graham, that I can assist you with?”

Will pictures a golden retriever waiting to be released to snatch the treat balanced on its nose.

“No, I think I’m good,” he says.

“Great! Have a nice flight!” Janice beams through the phone at him.

“Yeah, sure.” Will almost blurts out, you too, but she disconnects before he has the chance to embarrass himself.

He sends a quick text to Hannibal letting him know that he’ll be home around midnight and that Hannibal shouldn’t be there when he gets back. Hannibal’s response is immediate.

Is everything alright? Has something happened?

Will sighs while debating what to tell Hannibal.

I think I’m being placed on leave. I have an appointment with Dr. Bloom after my flight.

Will, you are doing poorly to alleviate my concerns.

Will snorts a laugh to himself.

I killed Hobbs.

Will waits with bated breath for Hannibal to respond, ultimately giving up after several minutes. He slides his phones away, one into each pocket, mulling his disappointment. It's not like he wanted Hannibal to send him a confetti emoji but some acknowledgment would've been appreciated. Will lets his gaze wander down the buzzing yellow hallway glad that he didn't spend the money on that game since now he'll have to foot the bill for an uber.

Unless.

Sauntering down the hall to the elevator located near where Will is sitting is none other than bloodshot eyed Randy.

"Excuse me," Will says as Randy passes by.

Randy stops and turns to Will.

"You again?" He remarks with an amused smirk.

"Could I trouble you for a ride to the airport?" Will shifts his leg to better access his wallet in his back pocket whilst showcasing the right cheek of his ample ass. He plucks a twenty from his wallet and holds it out to Randy.

Randy tears his eyes away from exactly where Will wanted him to look to accept the crumbled twenty. Randy tucks it into the front pocket of his dark jeans with a mischievous grin. His shift must've just ended given that he's out of his scrubs.

"Got any more party tricks to keep me entertained? It's sorta a long drive."

“Better buckle up, Randy, cause it’s going to be a fun ride.” Will stands up from the horrible plastic chair just close enough for Randy to pick up on the undertone but not so close to elicit another glare from the prudish nurse.

With a vigorous flick of the wrist Hannibal over shades the shadows on his latest drawing. He leans back in his chair to gain another perspective and frowns. Hannibal sighs as he uses the knuckle of his pinkie to lessen the darkness on the side of Will’s face in his newest sketch of him.

Will dropped the mic on Hannibal. First when he requested that Hannibal not be at his home when he returns. Followed shortly by the delicious text that Will killed someone today. That’s what they call a mic drop. Leaving Hannibal to pick it up.

Nevertheless, Hannibal still dutifully took care of the dogs so that they would be fine until Will gets home. Hannibal is now sequestered in his office feeling like he’s been banished. But. He’s only a short drive to Quantico. In case Will changes his mind and wants to see him after his session with Dr. Bloom. Or maybe Hannibal will just pop over there himself. Deactivating his visitor's card must’ve slipped through the cracks because he can still get into the building. Considering that brevity is one of Dr. Bloom’s many likable qualities Hannibal will only have to keep himself busy until ten thirty which will allow enough time for the drive to be there by eleven.

He rests his back against his chair to appraise his work, even though his eyes wander to the empty seat where Will sat for only three sessions before things escalated so. Partly because Hannibal could feel himself becoming obsessed with Will in the duration of their short meeting in Jack Crawford’s office. Which only compounded after their first session at Hannibal’s practice. Will's capacity for empathy coupled with his increased sense of suffering would've made for an excellent plaything. If only. But the chance at being understood, being seen, was far too great to resist. How grand could it be to have a companion in this forsaken place? Hannibal fiddles with his phone unsure of whether he should try to call Will. A text message felt so inadequate to properly convey the feelings surging through him once he read Will’s confession. They need to have this conversation face to face. Hannibal wants to see the change in Will after taking a life. He wonders if the distance Will put between them after he denied Will’s proposal to run away together has shrank. If the laboriously built artifice has crumbled. This mountain of a bluff eroded away to reveal his true nature. Hannibal gets up to pace his office looking at the myriad items as if he didn’t arduously collect them himself spanning many years. He continues to the door stilling his movements with an ear leaned close. His eyes brighten at the rustling he hears on the other side. It can’t be Will already? Can it? Hannibal re-tucks his shirt a little neater, rolls his shoulders and opens the door.

A slight woman with coiled red hair fumbles with her bag before looking up at him.

"May I assist you?" He asks while wondering where she purchased her wonderful skirt suit coordinate.

"Dr. Lecter, I presume?" Her voice is smooth, practiced courtesy.

Hannibal inclines his head at the uncanny facial resemblance. She's more well-dressed and not preceded by a cloud of smoke and unwashed body parts but she is certainly Freddy Lounds' daughter.

"Ms. Lounds, what a pleasure to finally meet you." Hannibal opens the door wider for her entrance.

She shakes her head. "No, you are mistaken, I'm not." She pauses, reconsidering her tactic. She frowns as she readjusts the strap on her shoulder while looking past Dr. Lecter into his chic office. The same office that was the last place Miriam Lass was seen alive. And the very same office Will Graham has had his therapy sessions. This seems to be the genesis point for unfortunate events.

"Is there another name you would prefer?" The smile he gives her is something that one would practice in a mirror to trick people into thinking that you are capable of smiling spontaneously and kindly all the time.

That feeling kicking around in her gut, the invariable one that has never led her astray all these years in her dangerous line of work is doing quite the can-can right now.

"I should go, this was a mistake." She turns away. She'll have to find something else to occupy her anxious energy after arguing with Jack Crawford when he repeatedly refused her help or an ambulance. Freddie had no other choice but to leave him when Jimmy Price and the other non-descript uniformed men arrived on the scene. She wasn't expecting the good doctor to be in at this hour otherwise she would've left her lockpicking kit at home.

"Please, wait. Come inside. I imagine this has something to do with Miriam Lass. I must say that I would love to have a word with you. As a longtime fan." Hannibal has some time to kill, and Freddie is the perfect person for the deed.

Freddie stops her slow walk up the hall. "I'm listening," she says as she looks back

demurely over her shoulder."

"Did you hear the rumor about the smitten trainee and the guru with a stale marriage and an even more stagnant career?"

"I'm intrigued." She walks towards Hannibal with a tight smile.

Hannibal fully opens the door to his office and gestures for Freddie to step inside the red tinged den. She knows it's a trick of the lights against the red striped curtains, but she can't quell the feeling of entering the belly of the beast.

"Ah, but before I forget," Hannibal says as he shuts the door while blocking her exit with another smile that looks more like a leer.

"I need your cell phone and whatever other clever little recording device you have nestled in that smart purse of yours." He holds his hand out making Freddie think about the devil offering a damned piece of fruit to Eve.

Freddie shakes her head as if she has no idea what he means but his gaze is unrelenting. She sighs and rummages through her open purse to place her phone and recorder in the palm of Dr. Lecter's hand. But he tilts his head expecting another item. Freddie scoffs as she reaches for her other phone in her coat pocket to give to Hannibal.

"There now," he says as he walks around her to put her belongings on his desk.

He subtly pulls a sheet of paper over a sketch he was working on which Freddie cranes her neck to get a better look at in vain. He catches her peeking and tsks as he walks over to a satin red couch, patting the cushion next to him. Freddie scuffs the front of her boot when her step hesitates her walking towards Dr. Lecter. She recovers with a quick smile as she plops down on the flat padding of the vintage looking divan.

She clears her tight throat. "I do love office gossip and maybe we can circle back to that later. But I'm actually more interested in your opinion of Will Graham. Off the record, of course."

Freddie feels Dr. Lecter tense like a wind-up toy ready to burst at the wrong word. She clears her throat again.

“Sorry my allergies are bothering me today,” she says with a cheery smile.

“May I offer you something to drink?” Hannibal rises from the divan and walks towards a small refrigerator back near his desk.

“Oh, thank you. A bottle of water would be fine.”

Hannibal turns back to Freddie. “Ms. Lounds, we’re both adults here, how about a glass of red wine? I’ve read that the antioxidants are great for allergy flare ups.” With his brows raised and scolding tone he has the air of a schoolteacher reprimanding an uncooperative student.

“No, I really shouldn’t.” She shakes her head.

“Why not? You’re off the clock as am I. And we’re only having a conversation.”

They lock eyes with one another in a battle of wills. Freddie concedes defeat when she looks away first with the hope that a little liquor will loosen Dr. Lecter’s lips when it comes to breaking the Hippocratic oath.

“Alright. One drink.” She smiles coyly.

“Perfect.” Hannibal turns back to the fridge to retrieve the wine bottle. He pulls two glasses from a shelf against the back wall of which he pours a generous portion for each of them.

His back is straight and poised as he walks gracefully back to the divan.

Freddie arches a brow as she accepts the glass. “Well, if all this doesn’t work out,” Freddie motions with her glass to the remarkable office around them, “you certainly would do well as a waiter at some ritzy restaurant. Cheers.” A playful barb. Freddie watches Dr. Lecter’s reaction over the rim of her glass as she takes a sip.

He smiles brightly at her. But it does nothing to hide the tremor under his eye as it twitches in annoyance.

“To career changes,” Dr. Lecter toasts. He samples the red wine, closing his eyes briefly to

consider its taste. "And you could be the raccoon rooting around the dumpster, sorting through the rotten scraps for a meal."

Freddie blinks hoping to refocus the blazing red glare emanating from Dr. Lecter directed at her. She takes a gulp of the bitter wine. "And where do you think Will Graham would be?" She swallows down the bile-tinged wine forcing its way back up her throat.

Dr. Lecter looms over her. "I suppose he would be supplying the fish to the restaurant."

"Right." Freddie nods her head. "What about Matthew Brown?" She ducks her head to take another mouthful of the terribly tart wine.

Dr. Lecter narrows his eyes. "I'm not sure I know whom you're speaking of."

"Really? Will never mentioned his ex-boyfriend to you? Huh. Well, I guess I wouldn't want to talk about it either given how it all ended."

Dr. Lecter sits down next to Freddie on the divan closer than necessary. Freddie shifts to place her wine glass on the side table nestled near the divan making sure to use the coaster but also placing some space back between them.

"You've got my attention, Ms. Lounds." Dr. Lecter pauses expectantly for Freddie to offer her first name to him.

Which she does not.

"I accept your rumor about the smitten trainee and the guru and I'll raise you the rumor about the troubled professor and the beguiled student." She folds her hands neatly on her lap.

"A little game of quid pro quo, how delightful." Hannibal says with a twinkle in his maroon hued eyes.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Will has his meeting with Dr. Bloom. Will and Hannibal have a confrontation in a kitchen (because of course). Brian makes an unannounced visit to Will's home with detrimental consequences.

Chapter Notes

Content/trigger warnings: Sexual content, dubious consent, graphic depictions of violence/murder/cannibalism, necrophilia (light), dog attack & death (sorry), mention of child exploitation, seizure

Lithuanian vocab- mylimasis = beloved
brangusis berniukas = dear boy

CEU = Child Exploitation Unit

Chapter 25

“Mr. Graham?” A hesitant voice calls into the shadows from afar.

Dr. Bloom steps into the empty lecture hall, slowly approaching a lowered head on the desk in the orchestra pit with quiet footfalls. The old yellowed bulb in the painfully dated desk lamp struggling to illuminate the room does little to assuage her apprehension.

“Mr. Graham?” She considers reaching forward to awaken him with her touch but decides against it.

Jack warned her that he’s adverse to touch. And eye contact. And that he may mirror her mannerisms. Depending on his mood it may be mockery or echopraxia. Needless to say, Dr.

Alana Bloom is very intrigued by this man. Even though it's close to ten thirty at night she feels alert. At least now Jack will be the one owing her a favor.

"Will Graham?" Her voice echoes off the blank walls and empty desks.

"Office hours are over for today. Email me for an appointment." The sentence is so well practiced that it's easy to recite during sleep.

Dr. Bloom snaps her fingers inches from his nose. That does it. He startles back to the here and now. He looks up at her with glasses askew and swollen eyes.

"Yes?" He's annoyed.

Dr. Bloom does something all women are taught to do, smile to soften the tone of the situation.

"I'm Dr. Alana Bloom. Mr. Crawford requested my assistance with your," she pauses while fumbling for the right word.

"Stability?" Will supplies flicking his eyes up at her. He sits up and rolls his neck. His glasses move back into place.

"Sure, stability. Are you free for a little introductory session?"

"Now?" He asks even though he knows he doesn't have a choice.

"There's a little kitchen down the hall with some instant coffee." She offers kindly.

Will sighs. He's already familiar with the disappointing kitchenette down the hall. Janice did leave out coffee and mugs like she said she would. She didn't mention that it would be the worst instant coffee Will has ever had. Maybe she did it on purpose. Thinking back that smiley post-it note did seem malicious.

"Sure, I just need a minute to pack up and I'll meet you there."

She crosses her arms and takes a step back from his desk. "I'll wait."

Will starts shuffling through the crime scene photos and his scribbled notes on the scattered yellow papers that he grabbed from his office to help pass the time while waiting for Dr. Bloom to arrive. Certain papers and their corresponding photos get put into one blank manila folder while others get put into a different folder. He looks up at her.

“I hope you’re learning plenty of fascinating things about me by watching me tidy paperwork, Dr. Bloom.”

“Oh, I’m learning lots.” She quips.

Will gives up and stuffs everything into an empty plastic bag he found in his office since his messenger bag and luggage are sitting in his car in the parking lot. Janice was correct in that his luggage would already be waiting for him at the Dules airport security desk, probably some errand forced on a trainee from the local pd. He stands up motioning with his hand for her to lead the way hoping to distract her from the airport grim sheen coating his skin. If Will had known Dr. Bloom was going to be this pretty he would’ve freshened up in the bathroom down the hall once he arrived here. But it’s too late for that now. He’s just glad that his flannel button down is dark enough to hide any possible sweat stains that managed to seep through his under shirt from this horribly long day.

Dr. Bloom starts another conversation to keep him walking alongside her. At this time of night the lights operate by motion sensor. As they make their way down the hall the lights flick on to lead the way.

“Do you usually fall asleep while working or is this a recent development?”

“I tend to fall asleep when I’m deprived of humane working hours. Don’t tell Jack.” The plastic bag rustles against Will’s thigh as he sets a quicker pace for them that has them outpacing the motion sensor being activated.

Dr. Bloom smirks knowing that this is going to be a tedious conversation. At least dentists get to use drugs to make their patients more pliable.

They arrive at the kitchen and it smells like almost all the other conference rooms in this building musty with a hint of discouragement. While the others smell like death, sweet and cloying. Will picks a seat at the comically tiny round table and Dr. Bloom positions herself directly in front of him by strategically choosing one of the two chairs left, smoothing her dress as she sits down with a sigh.

“Not too comfortable, huh?”

She means the chairs, but Will knows a loaded question when he hears one.

“Designed with the sole purpose of making you want to get out of here as soon as possible.”

Dr. Bloom nods her head. She laces her fingers together propping them on the cold table.

“I heard about your father. I’m sorry about that, Mr. Graham. Death, especially that of a parent can be a confusing and sorrowful time.”

“I’ve been hearing that a lot.”

She doesn’t let her face respond. A wonderful skill she learned she had in college while playing poker with the department chairs and teaching assistants on Thursdays when they would commingle for some lighthearted fun. Alana would clean up quite well. She tucks this little detail away for her write up later to send to Jack. She rightly assumed that a proper conference room at this stage would make him close up even tighter than he is now like an agitated clam. Never mind even trying to produce a pen and paper to take notes. He’d bolt out of here faster than a dog hearing a thunder clap for the first time.

“How have you been sleeping, Will, may I call you Will?”

“Let’s just keep things professional.”

She raises her brows. “Sure, Mr. Graham. Let’s not blur boundaries. Do you feel,”

Will interrupts her. “Unstable?” He smiles with malice as the hall lights shut off.

“You seem a bit hostile. Is there something,”

He interjects again. “How would you feel if someone came knocking around your head uninvited?”

“I would feel offended.”

Will nods.

“But then I would feel grateful that someone took an interest in my wellbeing. Especially after a particularly intense case resulting in a hostage situation and the alleged perpetrator’s death.”

Will looks away. “The only aspect of my being Crawford cares for is my imagination. And it’s only useful to him if its vessel isn’t broken.”

“Do you often feel like people have ulterior motives for being in your company?” Dr. Bloom shifts tactics when Will doesn’t respond to her barbed sympathy.

Will looks back to Dr. Bloom with dull eyes.

“I feel like this is a waste of my time and that I have more important things to do. So, if you’ll excuse me.” Will swings the plastic bag that was leaning against his chair leg onto the table as if he is going to start digging back into those case files.

“No problem, Mr. Graham. I’ll see you tomorrow morning for our proper appointment.”

Dr. Bloom gets up and leaves Will sitting at the table with his papers and photos spilling out from the plastic bag. She endeavors to slow her quick steps away from Will so that she is not walking in the dark for longer than she has to. Dr. Bloom mulls over her anxiety about not wanting to encounter Will again. She’s glad she pushed back against Jack to have this meeting at her private practice. The idea of Will’s presence lingering in a place she considers safe like a murky shadow makes her nauseous. She takes a left, deciding to make her way back to the lecture hall Will was asleep in to look through his desk for anything useful. She hates how loud her sensible heels are in the empty hallway.

She’s surprised to see someone beat her to it.

“Dr. Lecter? What a surprise.”

Hannibal looks up at Alana. He closes a drawer that has nothing more interesting than a pen cap and a dried-out rubber band.

“Good evening, Dr. Bloom. But I imagine since we’re now colleagues we can graduate to a

first name basis?”

She smiles genuinely. He’s always been a flirtatious bastard.

“I don’t see any issue with that. So, tell me Hannibal, what are you doing here?”

He comes around the desk to walk closer to her. She tamps down the urge to take a step back ashamed of her nighttime fears of being alone with a man.

“I was looking for Will.” He grins. “Seems like Jack Crawford is calling in all his favors tonight.”

Dr. Bloom crosses her arms in front of her chest and snorts a laugh shaking her head at the audacity of Jack. From what Jack told her Dr. Lecter was relieved of his duties to Will due to some media gossip. But this wouldn’t be the first time Jack went back on his word if it benefited his end game.

“I just left him. We had a little preliminary therapy session.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “I can only imagine how that went.”

“And that’s all you’ll have. I can’t discuss him with you.” She raises her brows.

“I’ve always admired your steadfast adherence to rules.”

“Then you shouldn’t be surprised that I’m going to ask you for your file on him. Jack wants me to have all of the notes on Mr. Graham.”

“This sounds like it’s becoming very official.”

“Unfortunately, it has. DA Prurnell advised Jack that his early retirement wishes could be granted sooner unless there was an issue with Graham.” The wording is just so that the lie is small enough to not offend her integrity. When the actual issue is that Will killed a man today and that he doesn’t seem at all bothered by it. Just like how he didn’t seem to be bothered by the death of his father. Which if she is to believe the snippets of gossip was a particularly strained relationship. The stressors are stacking up. All that needs to happen now is something like one of his many dogs dying and he’ll snap like a tension cord.

“Jack wants to cover his ass, so to speak?”

Alana licks her lips. “So to speak. I can drop by your office for that file? Does tomorrow work?”

“Unfortunately, I do not have anything for you. Our sessions were considered officially unofficial. But I do have beer and wine if that helps take the sting out of it. You can stop by tonight.”

Hannibal leans against the desk which flaunts the fine tailoring of his slender frame even in his more casual attire of light brown slacks and a soft looking red v-necked sweater.

“No thanks, I’ve got to drive back to Georgetown tonight. Jack has me in a temporary residence on campus for an indeterminate amount of time. I need to move in there.”

“May I be of assistance?”

“Are you trying to get me alone, Hannibal?” Alana flicks her lustrous hair over her shoulder showing off the longline of her neck.

“We’re alone now.”

“That we are.”

She’s quiet for a moment considering her options.

“I can manage. Perhaps another time for that beer?” She turns away from him before he can answer her.

“Do you need an office for your therapy sessions with Will?” He calls after her.

“No need. I’m going to use any empty conference rooms I can find here. Goodnight, Hannibal,” she calls out over her shoulder.

Hannibal waits until he can no longer hear the echo of her heels in the hall before he leaves the lecture room. He takes the opposite hall she took wanting to look for Will hoping that he’s

still in the building. He walks with purpose to one of the rooms with the door ajar and the light on which he realizes is a small kitchenette. Most likely a breakroom for employees.

“Will?” Hannibal calls out to stock still figure in the room.

Hannibal enters the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

“Will?” He gently places a hand on Will’s shoulder feeling heat emanating through his clothes.

Will stares blankly at the electric kettle with his mouth slightly agape. He inhales suddenly and takes a step back falling into Hannibal’s waiting arms.

“Hannibal?” Will rights himself turning to face Hannibal. “How are you here? Why?” He trails off looking over Hannibal’s shoulder as if there’s someone standing in the doorway.

“Please don’t tell me Dr. Bloom sent you to scold me for my rude behavior.” He pivots back to the kettle turning it off and pouring the hot water into a mug with the instant grounds waiting at the bottom looking all too much like fresh dirt on a new grave.

“Quite the contrary. I was hoping to catch you before you left to ask how things are.”

Will swirls the mug conscious of how close their bodies are. How easy it would be to lean back against Hannibal to let Hannibal bend him forward over the counter. Will puts the mug down on the counter.

“What do you think?” Will asks with a hint of snide in his tone.

“I can’t help but think that you’re angry with me and are now avoiding having a conversation about a resolution to all this. Isn’t it good to see me?”

Will turns around to face Hannibal while leaning his back against the counter. “Good? No.” Will watches the hurt ripple across Hannibal’s face. So, he tosses another stone.

“You’re the one that told me no. You’re the one that said I wasn’t ready. After everything.” Will bites his lip. “I told you that I killed someone today and you didn’t even have the

decency to talk to me! Isn't that what you wanted?" Will swallows as tears glaze over his blue eyes.

"I felt it was important to talk in person about that but perhaps I was wrong. Allow me to make amends for that." Hannibal's gaze drifts down to Will's lips then his throat landing on the growing bulge between his thighs.

"I'm very upset with you. It'll be a lot of work to make it up to me." Will is flummoxed that a single smoldering look from Hannibal is enough to set his blood ablaze and pumping to one purposeful location.

"I've never been one to shy away from work. I like to get my hands dirty."

Will leans more fully against the counter letting his thighs connect with Hannibal's legs. Hannibal takes a step forward careening into Will's space placing his hands on either side of Will's hands gripping the edge of the counter. He inches closer to Will's neck and breathes in the scent of other places. Hannibal pauses. And other people.

"Here?" Will chokes out as Hannibal lathes his tongue over his pulse point before tenderly biting down on the hot flesh of Will's throat tasting what he noticed as he leaned into Will. Someone else's saliva.

"We could move to someplace more private. Have you seen the roomy desk Jack has in his office?" Hannibal says into Will's neck while calculating how to proceed.

Will moans as he closes his eyes. How delicious would it be to be sprawled out atop Jack's desk leaving drops of sweat and come on the paperwork neatly piled there as he's being fucked thoroughly by Hannibal? It feels vindictive enough to be on the side of righteousness. Will being the one to finally fuck Jack over and rub his nose in it.

Hannibal keenly watches Will's reaction to his dangerous suggestion as he slides a hand up Will's arm and across his chest before gripping Will's throat.

"But before we continue, I must confess that I'm quite distracted."

Will furrows his brow.

"It seems as though someone else has already smeared you with their attention." A covetous

flare lights in Hannibal's eyes as the grip on Will's throat tightens ever so slightly.

Will swallows against the crush. "I may have promised someone a blow job if they drove me to the airport. Are you jealous?"

Hannibal tilts his head and searches Will's mouth examining the crevices of Will's lips and the minute dip above his chin for evidence. Hannibal invades Will's space again breathing in this mystery man's offensive scent of cigarette smoke, breath mints and the acrid tang of ketones. There's a coppery hint of blood and saliva mostly localized on Will's neck.

Will shifts in the unnerving silence from Hannibal who still has a tense hold of Will's throat while crowding him against the counter's edge.

"Is that what you want, Will? For me to fly into a jealous rage?" Hannibal stares into Will's eyes.

Will looks away with a scoff. "So, you're not at all bothered that I gave some guy a blow job?" Will tries to shrug past Hannibal's body caged around him but there's no running away from this conversation.

"There's no reason to be jealous of someone who's beneath me. And you for that matter. You could run a train through every bar in the greater Baltimore area and nary a one would compare to what we have. To know you how I know you inside and out. Besides the simple fact that you did not fellate that man."

Will violently turns away from Hannibal's advances, breaking free from the grip on his throat. He stands up straighter, colliding into Hannibal's legs and pushes Hannibal back with a firm hand against his chest.

It's a rough touch that knocks the wind out of Hannibal. His eyes widen in shock.

"I'm leaving now." Will says as he advances toward Hannibal who just so happens to be blocking the closed door.

Will raises his brows and sighs when Hannibal doesn't budge.

"Will?"

Will shakes his head while trying to bite back a smirk.

“What is it?” Hannibal asks.

“I just can’t believe that this is the infamous Ripper. The Monster of Venice that terrorized an entire region. You’re nothing more than a domesticated house cat purring at my feet for attention.” Will’s harsh words are spoken quietly.

“Is that so?” Hannibal looms in the doorframe with his shadow taking up the space that his body doesn’t. He reaches for the light switch and in a blink, they are both shrouded in darkness that floods the room in a suffocating rush just as the hall lights time out.

Will can feel Hannibal stepping closer to him.

“You’re not entirely right, Will. Yes, I have been more subdued since I’ve made your acquaintance. I wrongly assumed that would be appreciated by you. Didn’t you like my gifts that I made for you? Flowers and chocolate seem so bland when courting someone. But upon further reflection you seem to be enthralled by my more violent nature.”

Will jerks his head to the right when he hears a drawer being opened. Before he has time to question what’s going on Hannibal has him by the collar of his flannel button down shirt and slams his back against the cool surface of the refrigerator. Will’s harsh inhale collides with the cacophony of buttons being strewn across the floor and the ripping of fabric as Hannibal tears Will’s cheap shirt open. Hannibal presses his forearm across Will’s neck to lift his chin up.

Will wants to laugh at the three prong scrape of a fork being dragged down the column of his exposed throat to his chest but the laugh of it gets severed by the sharp sting of metal against one of his raised nipples.

“I’ve wanted to make a meal of you since our first meeting in Jack’s office.” Hannibal’s voice takes up all the space in the room, enveloping Will in a warm cocoon.

The metal is searingly cold even through the thin material of his cotton t-shirt against his fevered flesh. Hannibal presses harder so that the prongs pierce Will’s shirt and tear the fabric as he pulls the fork down, exposing Will’s tender nipple to the humid air. Hannibal brings the fork back to Will’s nipple and twists the peaked bud between the tines of the fork as if he were spooling spaghetti from a dinner plate before a big bite. Will arches his back and gasps at the sensation while his hands flail against Hannibal’s forearm still pressed against his neck.

For a fleeting moment of mercy Hannibal releases Will's nipple from the fork to further drag it down his torso, leaving a trail of torn fabric and scratched flesh along the way. With a devilishly deft hand Hannibal manages to undo Will's jeans and pull them just low enough to gain access to Will's engorged arousal.

"How many mouthfuls do you think you are?" Hannibal purrs into the shell of Will's burning ear.

Hannibal scrapes the underside of one of Will's testicles through his boxers while lifting it up with the fork. And Will can't help but think that his balls are just sacs of juicy meat ready to be bitten. Will tightens his grip on Hannibal's forearm which will no doubt leave finger shaped bruises come daylight. Blood surges his already painful erection at the thought of what marks Hannibal will leave behind for him to find and reminisce about in the days to come until they fade away into nothing.

"You're awfully quiet, Will. I have half a mind to cut out your clever tongue since you're not using it. Though what a waste that would be." Hannibal releases his forearm from pressing against Will's throat and steadies Will by his shoulder as oxygen and blood recharge his faculties. Hannibal's other hand remains occupied with gliding the fork along Will's hard erection.

"I can make you come just like this. But that sounds like something a domesticated house cat would do, toy with its meal with its trimmed claws."

Hannibal relents his kittenish manipulation with the fork along Will's quivering member. Suddenly grabbing Will by the crown of his hair while simultaneously using the instep of his shoe in the crook of Will's knee to make him bend to Hannibal's will.

"Kneel. Kneel and undo my trousers." There's an intoxicating hum to Hannibal's words that travels to the darkest places of Will's animal instincts.

The fork is still clutched in the hand gripping Will's hair. He can feel the warmed metal against his scalp. With unsteady hands Will does as he's told.

"Take my cock out." Hannibal's other hand tenses on Will's shoulder.

Hannibal exhales slowly once Will wraps a hand around his girth.

"Look at me," Hannibal commands.

Will raises his eyes, now adjusted to the dark room, to meet Hannibal's simmering gaze.

"Slide it into your mouth. Slowly." Hannibal stares down at Will as he licks his lips before parting them to guide the first few inches of Hannibal's cock into his mouth all the while keeping steady eye contact.

Hannibal's steely resolve slips for a moment once he feels Will's tongue cushioned against his cock. He closes his eyes briefly, swallows, and inhales an uneven breath.

A soft pink wave of summer nostalgia shivers through Will. The weight on his tongue, the stretch of his lips and the pooling of his saliva in his mouth. No matter how many years pass or how many different cocks he swallows, Will always is taken back to that first time as a fumbling, uncertain teen. At least he's learned a few new tricks since then.

Will swirls his tongue around the tip several times being sure to give some attention to Hannibal's leaking slit. Will uses his left hand to pump the base of Hannibal's cock while his right hand stays dormant resting on his own thigh. He'll switch out to use his dominant hand later on. He pulls back on the silky, clean smelling skin to suction his lips around the head of Hannibal's exposed cock. Will sucks off Hannibal with a wet pop to lick broad stripes from root to tip.

Hannibal shifts his stance just as Will devours the entirety of his length in one gulp.

"Fuck. Mylimasis. Brangusis berniukas." Hannibal quietly cries out. His hands relax for a breath before retaining their hold on Will.

Will isn't sure what those Lithuanian words mean. They could be curses or praise. Either way, Will considers it a victory.

With Will's nose pressed into Hannibal's freshly laundered black boxer briefs his unfurling smirk feels like an unraveling of wings. Well, as much as he can smirk with what has to be eight inches stuffed down his throat. He swallows, throat working around the intrusion. Hannibal's hand floats down from Will's shoulder to skim his neck, feeling the protrusion as Will's tight throat struggles. As Will slides Hannibal out from his mouth he feels his saliva dribbling from the corners of his lips down to his chin. His knees burn from the strain of kneeling and the unforgiving rigidness of his jeans but it's his hard and dripping cock that has him repositioning for some relief. He feels out of practice and no match for Hannibal's inhuman stamina.
Will continues to tease the tip of Hannibal's swollen member while pumping the base, unsure if he can deep throat Hannibal again.

Except that choice isn't for Will to make. Hannibal moves his hand from the top of Will's head to the base, cradling him as he pushes back into his mouth. Will inhales to control his gag reflex as tears blur his vision. His hands scramble to control Hannibal's thrusts, grasping at Hannibal's stupidly overpriced trousers to clutch at the sturdy thighs hidden within as Hannibal leisurely fucks his mouth. Each gasp and moan from Hannibal is a brick laid on Will's building climax.

Will manages a throat full of air by pulling back to evade another one of Hannibal's thrusts and sets his own pace of sucking Hannibal's cock, head bobbing up and down with his flattened tongue wrapping around most of his member. Will ghosts one of his hands down Hannibal's thigh to his own throbbing erection still trapped in the confines of his boxers. When he's met with Hannibal's loafer stepping roughly on his fingers.

"Patience, mylimasis. Like your hounds wait for their treats, so will you." As Hannibal stamps against Will's fingers to further drive his point, the tip of his loafer thwacks the side of Will's rigid member.

The pleasing shock of violence thrills Will's nerves. His cock twitches as he whimpers wantonly around Hannibal's girth. Will eagerly swallows the steady stream of bitter precome as he uses both of his hands to get Hannibal off, one stroking the base of his cock while the other ventures deeper into Hannibal's soft cotton underwear, now damp from Will's eager mouth, surely stretching the fit to ruin, to teasingly finger Hannibal's perineum. Will moans again when he feels Hannibal's hips stutter which slips Will's finger all the way to Hannibal's rim. Will rubs his fingertip along the edge of Hannibal's rim with steady pressure. Hannibal bucks into Will's mouth at the buzzing vibration of his muffled moans, sliding himself to the hilt into Will's mouth as he comes, spasming against the tight column of Will's throat. Something clangs sharply to the floor when Hannibal brings both of his hands to wrap around Will's neck as he feels Will swallow every drop that Hannibal force fed him.

Will's thighs clench as he frantically ruts up into the empty space, searching for anything to grant his release. Once Hannibal's panting breaths return to some semblance of normal, he steps back from Will to remove his softening cock from his mouth. As Hannibal's hands leave Will's neck, he thumbs at a trickle of escaping come from the corner of Will's mouth. Will watches with pleading eyes as Hannibal brings his thumb to his own mouth to suck with hollowed cheeks.

Will tightly shuts his eyes and balls his hands into fists to keep from touching himself.

"Clever boy." Hannibal rasps as if his throat was the one that was abused so thoroughly.

“Stand up. Slowly.” Hannibal watches Will stand on coltish legs.

Hannibal harshly maneuvers Will so that his back is against the fridge once more. He wraps his arms around Will to pull him tightly to his body, feeling Will’s hard cock, still trapped inside his boxers, nudge his flagging erection. Will inhales serenely when they make contact, rolling his hips twice before stopping himself. Hannibal nestles into the side of Will’s neck and bites at the shell of Will’s ear.

“I once ate a census taker’s liver because they interrupted my supper. With you, I think I’ll start with your heart.” Hannibal whispers hotly into Will’s ear before sinking his teeth into the side of Will’s neck and biting down just enough for a bright flash of pain and the sweet trickle of blood to soothe the burn. Hannibal sucks a livid bruise onto Will’s neck while lapping at the oozing blood from his wound.

Will clutches at the expanse of Hannibal’s shoulders as he comes undone; tossing his head back against the cool refrigerator door with his mouth open to cry notes of ecstasy into the dim room. His calves clench at the strain of keeping upright while his stomach muscles shudder from the intensity of his long awaited release. Beads of sweat find their way down Will’s legs, creeping along the free spaces where his jeans aren’t sticking to his balmy skin. He’s made a mess of himself. As the come starts to tackily dry against his skin Will considers how uncomfortable the drive home is going to be. There’s a prickling sting traveling down his torso from the faint scratches mixing with his sweat. It isn’t until Will catches his breath that he lets go of Hannibal. Hannibal follows in turn and takes several steps back to appraise his work. Damp curls cling wetly to Will’s fevered forehead. His lips are blushed and swollen from misuse. But it’s his eyes and the meaning behind them that sets Hannibal’s heart ablaze.

With a racing heart and sweaty palms, Hannibal looks away first and busies himself at the sink by wetting a paper towel to clean himself up before setting his clothes back to rights. Feeling like he’s on another plane of existence, Will watches Hannibal blithely go through the motions. He clears his throat when he can no longer stand Hannibal ignoring him.

“Will you cook for me? I want to have dinner with you at your place.” Will hastily says with his roughen throat.

“Are you inviting yourself over?” Hannibal rinses his hands at the sink.

“It’s rude of me, I know. But, I want to eat what you eat.”

A section of paper towel is torn from its holder and patted against Hannibal’s damp hands.

“My dear boy, you have already eaten what I eat.” The light stays off. Some conversations are better held under the safety of darkness.

“Oh,” Will says dejectedly.

“Tomorrow evening then. Seven.” Hannibal goes to leave Will, but he hesitates in the doorway. “What about your hounds?”

“They’ll be alright for a few hours.”

Hannibal nods to himself knowing full well that there will be no chance of Will spending the night and all that could have entailed. Hannibal leaves Will to his horrible and now cold instant coffee in the dark kitchen. It feels like a long goodbye.

Garret Jacob Hobbs sits on Will’s porch steps. His shirt is tattered and bloodied from the eight bullet holes piercing his body. His face is shiny and grey tilted to bask in the moonlight. He whistles. He whistles to summon the other creatures that lurk in the dark trailing their omens and plagues behind them like hushed secrets. Will feels himself being pulled tugged out from the forest and into the moonlight. He stops drinking the cool water but remains kneeling at the river’s edge, head inclined to the sound listening. The zika stag lifts its grand head and stares at him with matte black eyes. He hears it speak only in his mind. *Go*, the stag orders. Will swiftly does so with sure steps through the dense woods to his house. He wades through the hip deep fog until he reaches the steps. Hobbs whistling increases in pitch daring Will to cover his ears. But he isn’t moved. Hobbs smiles with black blood between his teeth.

“See?” He stands.

“This is what I wanted for you.” Hobbs holds his hands up for Will to see. Black blood covers his palms.

Bright red blood glows as it flows from his bullet wounds.

“He’s here,” Hobbs says. He glances over his shoulder.

Will opens his eyes. He awakens with the thought that there’s someone outside. He feels it

with such bell like clarity that he's sure he said it out loud. A sound, a scraping sound drags its way across the siding of his house up and down ticking like a card between bicycle spokes. A board creaks under their weight even with their careful steps. They pause. Then continue with the same lazy designs.

Will soundlessly gets out of bed. He wants to pull on the pair of discarded sweatpants laying on the floor, but he can't risk the dogs hearing his rustlings. They may scare off whoever is outside. And that's something Will wants entirely to himself.

He picks up the .44 that he left on his side table and crouches low to avoid the windows. Will nearly drops the gun when he hears the whistling. It's not as ethereal as his dream, it's more tuneless and pitchy. His anger stills him burning him in place. Will steadies his breath and jerks up rushing to the front door. He nearly rips the door from its rusty hinges as he tears it open. He aims at Brian Zeller with the safety off. His finger rests alongside the trigger.

"Didn't your mother warn you about whistling at night?"

Brian stares at Will slack jawed and wide eyed. A thin stick gripped in his hand. Even at this distance Will can see that Brian's eyes are bloodshot, either from alcohol or crying. Will realizes that he doesn't need to know the reason. It doesn't matter.

"Don't tell me you're superstitious? Afraid of ghosts finding out where you live?"

"I'm not afraid, Brian. And it's not ghosts that come to find you."

He rolls his eyes. Feigning boredom. His hand clenches around the stick considering his options.

"What is it then? What comes?"

Will smiles. Moonlight and darkness chasing their tails around his face.

"Death. Get inside."

Brian squares his shoulders, chest puffing up. Big man. He drops the stick.

"No, no. Pick that up."

Brian sinks. “Why?” His voice catches on the seriousness of the situation.

“Probable cause.”

Brian leans down with his eyes trained on Will. He grasps the stick and straightens up. Will moves over and flicks his gun at Brian.

“After you.”

Brian slinks around Will to get inside his house, slightly shivering about the shoulders.

The dogs are awake now. But they stay away from the stranger. It’s too quiet for a room full of so many living creatures. Jack rumbles a long growl with foamy bared teeth from his spot on one of the dog beds. None of the other dogs join in.

“Look Brian, I may’ve been sending you mixed signals but I’m just not into you that way.” Will shrugs his shoulders.

Brian narrows his eyes in angered frustration. “What the fuck? I’m not here for that.”

“Then why are you here skulking around my home at nearly four in the morning if not for a piece of ass?”

Brian shakes his head in tired exasperation. “You got me fired.” He says lowly.

“No, you got yourself fired. What were you hoping to accomplish by coming here?” Will still has the gun pointed at Brian.

He shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know man. Break a few windows. Slash your tires. Scare you a little.”

“Do you have a knife?” Will’s eyes are bright.

Brian shakes his head.

“Show me your pockets.”

Brian turns them out and holds his hands up. Jack stands to attention, ears pinned back against his head. Brian casts a worried look back.

“Call your dog off.”

“He’s fine. You drove all the way out here for adolescent mischief.”

Brian sighs. “I was drinking and talking up a big game and got myself all worked up.”

Will steps closer. “Who were you talking to? Who knows you’re here?”

Brian looks away from the gun barrel. “Who? No one. I was at home just talking to myself. I got fucking fired! You got me fired!” He clenches his jaw.

Will smiles again and it’s just as unsettling as before. “Talk, talk, talk. That’s what got you fired. You need to learn to say less. Maybe I can help you with that.”

Will lowers the gun while flicking the safety on and tosses it on the couch before he lunges at Brian. He whips the stick at Will and it makes stinging contact with his cheek. Brian pulls back again and it whizzes in the air slicing it in two missing Will as Jack launches himself and latches onto Brian’s arm. He yells dropping the stick to try to pry the dog off him, fingers stupidly wedging themselves under bone crunching teeth. Jack’s jaw is locked with 238 psi snapping his radius bone. Will holds Brian by his coat as Brian twists his body and kicks wildly at Jack’s exposed belly. Once, twice. He winds back for a third with his rigid steel toed boot. Jack yelps and releases his arm, dropping down to the floor.

Will is at his throat now squeezing. He searches briefly for Jack to see that he’s retching yellowish vomit in a puddle on the floor. Will returns his fiery gaze to Brian’s panicked face. He clammers his fingers against Will’s, his right hand is starting to swell, blood drips onto the floor, each splat shakes the room like an aftershock. His coat sleeve is sharply tented. Bone. Will kicks Brian’s knee. He drops to the wooden floor. Will forces Brian the rest of the way down onto his back. Time slows as Will lowers himself onto Brian with his knees pressing into Brian’s chest. He releases one hand from Brian’s throat to punch him bluntly in the face. Blood spurts from his nose and his eyes water. His voice rasps still trying to speak. Will grabs the sides of Brian’s head almost tenderly threading his fingers through Brian’s hair. He lifts Brian’s head while pursing his lips to shush the man beneath him begging for this to stop. Will smacks Brian’s head against the hard unforgiving floor. Once. Twice. The third sounds

different. Wet. Will pants in the quiet room. He lets go of the broken head. Brian's eyes roll trying to locate Will. When they finally land on him Brian opens his mouth gurgling words. Will leans down to whisper sweetly in his ear.

"I warned you."

Brian's breaths come and go rapidly as he tries to buck Will off him. Will rights himself to watch Brian's face. The flexible ribcage finally snaps under the pressure of Will's knees. Blood oozes between Brian's teeth. He tries to scream weakly resigned to his fate but still wanting someone to know that he doesn't like it. Tiny red bubbles of blood burst from his nostrils. It's the most beautiful Brian Zeller has ever looked. Will leans back down and seals his mouth over Brian's gaping maw hoarding all of those delicious sounds for himself. Will swipes his tongue across Brian's twitching tongue, wondering if he can taste Hannibal, if Brian knows who else has been in his mouth today. His teeth seek out Brian's writhing tongue. Will bites down and pulls, tearing the twitching muscle free. Will sways his body upright, his eyes heavy lidded from the endorphin rush. He spits the tongue onto Brian's weakly heaving chest. Jack runs over to them and snatches the meat for himself. Zeller reaches out to grab his leg. Will lunges down and bites a hunk of flesh from Brian's throat angling slightly to the left of the larynx for the internal carotid artery which sends blood to the brain. The artery feels like a slippery and slim rubber hose against his tongue. He swallows this meat for himself.
Brian brings his hands up to try to stop the slow gush of blood. Will pushes them away, moving his legs to trap Brian's arms under his weight. Will watches him bleed. The light leaves his eyes in small increments. It's like watching the sunset. Except shorter. Ten minutes. All of those years of life gone in ten minutes.

Will rolls his tense neck to distract himself from the pulsing erection shyly peeking through his boxers as his hips selfishly hump the mass under him. Will crushes his hands into fists and rests them on his shaking knees. He releases his hands, sliding them up his tense thighs. His hips rock back and forth of their own agenda. Sweat beads on Will's brow. He leans down caging his body around the one beneath him and allows himself to chase his pleasure against the stiffening heap. It's quick and graceless. Nonetheless, his body sings from the orgasm. His elbows shake from the burden of holding himself up. Will feels so blissfully tired. But there's still so much to do. He catches his breath before straightening up. Will gives himself a moment before standing. His knees are numb. He calls Hannibal.

He answers on the first ring. "Will? Is everything alright?"

Will hears rustling in the background, as if Hannibal is getting out of bed and putting clothes on.

"I finally explored those options you mentioned."

The rustling stops.

“Have you called anyone else?”

“Only you.”

“Where?”

“My living room.”

“How?”

Will hears the dry click of Hannibal’s throat and the lusty rasp in his tone.

“With my teeth,” Will whispers.

Hannibal’s breath catches. “What did he taste like?”

Will frowns. “Disappointment.”

Hannibal tsks. “That won’t do.”

“What should I do?”

“Wait for me. This time of night I can be there in under an hour.” Hannibal finishes getting dressed.

Will doesn’t want to be alone right now.

“Will?” Hannibal senses his hesitation. He stays on the line as he goes to his closet to retrieve his already packed bag for circumstances such as these.

Will walks to the half bath to clean himself up. His pupils shrink to pinpricks against the harsh light. He leans against the sink, leering at his blood covered mouth and chin. It’s

frightening and ghoulish. It's the closest Will's has ever felt to seeing his true self reflected back at him. A trunk closes.

"Will?" Hannibal asks again, his voice sounding fuller, like he has Will on speaker in his car.

Hannibal starts to drive to Will's house. He speeds recklessly through the dark.

"This felt better than killing Hobbs. I feel seraphic." Will feels himself hardening again as he imagines Hannibal killing recklessly in Italy. Will slides a hand down his damp boxers while his other grips the edge of the sink. He closes his eyes.

"Is that why you do it? To feel like a god?" He stutters, fisting his already sticky length from root to tip at a moderate pace.

Hannibal presses firmly down on the gas pedal when he realizes what Will is doing.

Will gasps slightly as he roughly handles his over sensitive cock. He stills his movements as Hannibal's voice penetrates through his thoughts.

"I want us to share moments like these together," Hannibal says as he keeps both of his hands tightly gripping the steering wheel when all he wants to do is palm his own tenting erection.

Will's eyes suddenly open wide, staring at himself. His focus is on the already bruised and swollen bite mark in the crook of his neck. He weakly comes again, only a dribble and the lightheaded feeling that follows. Will removes his hand from his boxers and washes it before he lowers his head to scrub at his face. He considers opening the vanity for the small bottle of mouthwash to rinse the taste of Brian's flesh and Hannibal's come from between his teeth. But the idea of spitting and watching the tiny red fibers swirl down the drain makes him frown.

A serious knock pounds Will's front door.

Will's landline rings shrilly from the living room.

"It's Jack. I know it." Will says.

The car swerves. Hannibal over corrects.

“Don’t answer.”

Silence.

“Will Graham? This is Special Agent Clarice Starling. Jack Crawford requested that I stop by. Would you mind opening the door for me? ”

A soft patter of footsteps.

“Do you know what time it is?” Will calls out while trying to stop his dog, Jack, from mauling the prone body on the floor with his jaws latched around what’s left of the throat.

“Trust me, I’m well aware. This is a courtesy wellness check. Apparently a Mr. Zeller has been saying some pretty threatening things. Mostly about you.”

“So Jack sent you all the way out here to check up on me?”

“Yeah. Just going along with protocall. You know how he is.” Her tone is light and playful as if to suggest they’re pals working together to humor their unreasonable boss.

“Leave it!” Will grimly yells in a whisper. Jack growls.

“What was that?” The wooden porch boards creak as Clarice leans closer to the door.

“Nothing, just my dogs acting up because there’s a stranger here and it’s still dark out.”

Will pulls back on Jack’s collar a dirty trick to cut off his air supply to force him to release. Jack barks his disdain loudly.

“Is anyone else in there with you?”

“No.”

This is the last sentence Hannibal hears as Will disconnects their call. He slams his palm

against the steering wheel as he speeds desperately further into the night.

“Look, I’ve heard that Mr. Zeller can be a vindictive little shit. So, if you guys got into it and it’s settled now, then that’s fine. But I just need you to open the door so I can fulfill my due diligence.”

“I’m not really dressed for company at the moment.”

“Mr. Graham, this really isn’t up for discussion anymore. Please open this door or I’ll have to do it myself.”

Will hears the keen sound of a gun holster unsnapping and the shuffling of boots for better positioning on his porch.

Will closes his eyes and sighs. He walks to the front door and opens it half way.

“Something happened. You need to call Jack.”

Clarice’s brow tightens with concern as she lowers her gun trained on Will ever so slightly.

“I was instructed not to bother him at the moment. Please step aside,” she commands.

“This isn’t something you can handle. Trust me and call Jack.”

Clarice flinches at the insult. Even though she knows damn well that if Will asked to see her badge the ink would still be wet and it would smell like it just came hot off the printer. Because it did. She shakes her head. “I can’t do that, Mr. Graham. Let’s just get this over with, shall we?”

Will moves away from the door to let Clairce pass. She walks further into Will’s dimly lit home with the gun sweeping the area. Will silently closes the door behind her when she’s inside. Once her eyes adjust the dead body with a dog chewing at it while another laps at the blood pooled on the floor is hard to miss.

“Fuck!” She yells while turning back to Will with the gun fully aimed at his chest.

Will puts his hands up in defense while still clutching his cell phone. “I can explain,” he says while moving closer to Clarice.

“Did you shut the door? Why did you shut the door?” Her voice turns shrill with panic.

“He trespassed on my property and assaulted me. My dog attacked him.” Will takes another step.

“Why didn’t you call the local pd?” Clarice retreats further into the den.

Will shakes his head and motions to his phone. “I tried Crawford first. But he didn’t answer.” Another step.

“Stop. Stop moving!” Clarice yells even though she takes a step back, slipping on a dog toy in the process.

“Shit,” she says.

She tries to catch herself from falling as her hand tenses on the gun releasing a shot into the ceiling with a resounding boom. Will flinches down instinctively. A chorus of barks and yelps sing out from their cozy beds before they scatter to other quieter rooms. All expect for Jack. The german shepherd rushes Clarice. She pivots to the snarling dog racing towards her and fires twice into its chest. The dog crumbles with a whimper.

“No!” Will yells as he tries to rush past Clarice to his dying dog bleeding out on the floor.

“Stay where you are!” Clarice pants.

They stare at each other for several moments when Will finally realizes that he recognizes her. Her dark hair is longer than the pixie cut she had some ten years ago. But her kind face and petite stature are the same. She liked to sit in on his lectures despite not taking the class for credit. Will knew it was only a matter of time before ceu snatched her up for their sting operations.

“I’m sorry.” She swallows. Her eyes scan Will’s face before drifting down to his neck.

“Christ. Did your dog attack you too?”

Will looks down at his phone and decides to call Jack himself. Will nearly gives up and disconnects the call after it rings for several moments when Jack finally answers.

“What did you do?” Jack sounds like death.

“He’s dead, Jack.”

“Stay put. Put Starling on the phone,” Jack says.

Will extends the phone to Clarice who hesitates before accepting it. Knowing that time is against him, Will rushes to the half bath to quickly clean himself up and change clothes. He wishes that he could warn Hannibal. But any calls that he makes now will be scrutinized once the investigation starts.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Crawford. I.” Her cheeks flush. “Yes, I know. He was mauled. I think it bit Mr. Graham as well. It even tried to attack me. The dog has been neutralized.” Clarice starts after Will. “He’s in the bathroom now. Well, he was in his underwear when he answered the door so. Okay.” She knocks on the bathroom door.

“Mr. Graham, you’ve got to come out now. Local pd are on their way.”

Will swings the door open and brushes past Clarice being sure not to look at his dead dog. He sits on the couch with his head in his hands.

“He wants to speak with you again.” The phone gets shoved under his nose.

Will sits up and takes the phone.

“Pending investigation, we’re going to have to take the dog.” Anger radiates through the phone like a hissing space heater. It feels mildly comforting to Will.

“When will I get him back? I always bury my dogs in the backyard.”

“Your dog killed someone. That’s how this works. Unless you have something to tell me.”

Bright headlights slice through the dark.

“Calling in a lot of favors tonight, aren’t you?” Will remarks.

An umarked van pulls into Will’s driveway.

“Do I have to add you to the tally?”

“Keep me out of your books,” Will says before disconnecting the call.

Clarice lets the two officers into Will’s home, leaving the door open for the other two to wheel in a stretcher. Will grimly wonders which one of the dead bodies they’ll remove first.

Hannibal sees the flashing blue and red lights as he passes the gas station nearest Will’s house. Two cop cars corner in a seemingly abandoned car. He slows his speed just as two more cop cars rocket past him, rocking his car in the process. Hannibal continues to his intended destination, looking forlorn as he drives past Will’s house and the various vehicles parked in Will’s driveway. There’s a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach warning him about the consequences of getting too close to someone as he catches a glimpse of Will being led to the back of one of the police cars.

Confusion presses her palms into Will’s chest as he sits in the back of the police cruiser making it difficult to breathe. Will stares out the window as the lights continue to flash in their strobe like manner that resonates as a piercing sustained note in his ears. The lights start to zig zag and spark. Will looks away from the window to his uncontrollable jerking fingers. His jaw clenches tightly. Will rolls his eyes to the seat next to him where Hannibal primly sits. Will opens his mouth to speak but it only chomps at the air stupidly. Hannibal opens the door and leaves Will behind. As the convulsions start Will thinks that deja vu feels a lot like nausea.

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